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RANGE NOVELETTE
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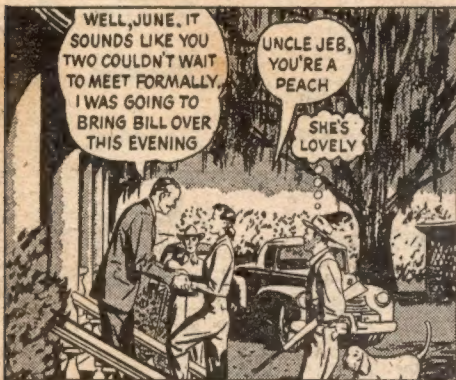
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Vol. 30, No. 3

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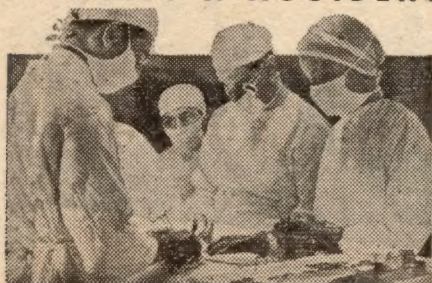
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DEADLY WARNING

By Z. A. TILGHMAN

"WHY DID you try to kill this man?" the district attorney asked, in the old United States court at Fort Smith, Arkansas, which had jurisdiction over the Indian Territory.

"Because he *gobbled* at me," was the answer. "I didn't want to kill him, so I shot him in the arm before he could kill me."

"You pretend you shot in self-defense?" the prosecutor asked, ironically. The judge from his high bench, leaned forward.

"What do you mean, *gobbled*?" he queried. His face was severe, for he, too, believed the implied self-defense was a falsehood. The prisoner answered steadily:

"When an Indian gobbles at you, it means death. You've got to kill him first."

Here was a point of evidence never before met in jurisprudence. The judge, incredulous, demanded further information. It was soon forthcoming. Several of the deputy marshals knew of it. Three white traders who had stores in the Indian country also testified.

The *gobble* was a loud noise, much like that of the turkey gobbler, but with something of the weirdness of the coyote howl. Indians were brought into court and induced to give it. One of them was asked:

"What is it for?"

"Means you kill um," answered the Red Man, briefly.

The gobble was used among the Cherokee, and sometimes among the Choctaw, who probably learned it from them. While many tribes had a distinctive war whoop, the *gobble* was an individual matter, and was a notice of death to any one within hearing. The prisoner was acquitted.

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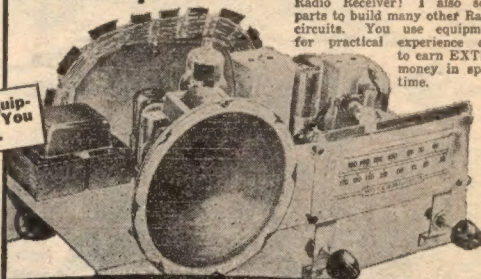
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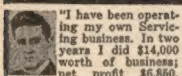


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ROUND-UP

By THE EDITOR

THE sociologists have a fancy name for the reason the Old West made all-fired exciting living. Mobility, they call it. That just means that a frontiersman could go up—or down—in a hell of a hurry. And it sure was true. One day an hombre might be a starving prospector, so broke he couldn't get a grubstake—and the next thing he knew, he had hit a bonanza. Or he might be a famous gunman, king of all he surveyed—and end up next morning boss of nothing but a few feet of boothill.

And what made this breathless world of change still more exciting was the fact that there were always some who tried to get ahead the easy way—on the wings of a blazing Colt. Like young Ed Dolson. He was pretty damned sick of sitting around year after year on his old man's poverty spread. He wanted to go far, and he wanted to go fast. Trouble was, he started off in the wrong direction. . . .

When Ed Dolson decided to quit Barren River range, he made his decision in a hurry. He rode up to the little poverty spread that his father, old Nueces Dolson, had clung to with hopeless desperation for some thirty hard years. Nueces went out to the corral just as young Ed was saddling the only decent horse.

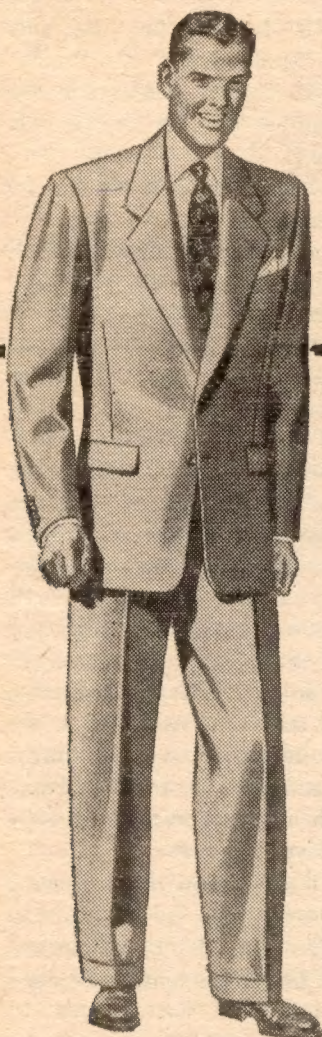
"I'm leavin'," Ed told his old man. "There ain't any future here in this God-forsaken place. If you hadn't been shiftless, you'd of knowed that long ago. I'm goin' to get somewhere, and make our name a big one. I'm goin' to be rich!"

His father looked into the kid's eyes in the moonlight and then he looked away. "You—you ain't in any kind of a tight, are you, Ed?"

"Hell no!" Ed snapped. "I just had some plans for doin' big things around here, and they fell through. That's all." He didn't say that his plans had been for sticking up

(Continued on page 10)

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(Continued from page 8)

the Greenwood stage, and he'd made a botch of the job.

"I'm glad to hear that," said his father. "You take that horse; he'll take you where you want to go in a hurry. . . . I guess I ain't been exactly fair to you, son, keepin' you on here. But just remember, if you ever need a place to come to, or want me—well, here's this place. Now get goin'."

Old Nueces Dolson waited until he could no longer hear the hurrying hoof beats of his son's horse, then listened again. There weren't any more sounds of horses pounding up the town road. He sighed and went to work on the blown horse that Ed had ridden up to the place, wiping the sweat marks and foam from the buckskin's hide.

Ed Dolson hit south toward the border, because it was a handy place to be in case any deputy showed up with a warrant. But no deputy showed up. For a while he tried his hand at cow-work, but brushpopping didn't seem any way to make money to bring him good times.

He wrote a letter to his father, saying that he was doing fine and had a good job. Sometime he'd either send for his dad, or he'd come back and show the town that there was one Dolson who'd proved himself something big.

Nueces wrote back right away saying that Ed still had a place to come to—that things were pretty slow just now, but there was enough grub and it would be a nice place to rest up.

By certain methods, Ed learned that there'd never been any warrant against him for that attempted stage holdup anyhow. So he rode back.

He didn't have to tell any lies, because Nueces never asked embarrassing questions when Ed saw him. The old man was in the Barren River jailhouse.

"They got me in here, son, because they think I stuck up the Greenwood stage," old Nueces said calmly. "There was a shotgun guard killed, and they figure I did it.

They've had the trial, and now I reckon there isn't anything to do but to wait. It won't take long."

"Did you do it—hold up the stage and kill that gent?" Ed asked.

Old Nueces just looked at him, and for the first time in his life Ed Dolson felt ashamed of himself.

"Don't you worry," he told his father. "I'll peel this jail off you."

Ed remembered Sheriff Mose Tanner and the prosecuting attorney, and a deputy named Rupe Sims. He went to see all of them, and they explained the case. It looked bad. They'd established the fact that Nueces had needed money to keep his little spread from being sold—and his wife's grave plot with it. He wasn't at home the night of the killing, and they'd found some of the stage money buried in the feed box in Nueces' barn. That seemed to be enough to convince the jury.

Ed Dolson got on his horse and went out to the scene of the stickup. He sat there on the ground a long time and did some heavy thinking. He was beginning to see himself as he really was, a lowdown, worthless, lazy ingrate. And a liar to boot. Then, frowning, he got on his horse and wearily rode back to town.

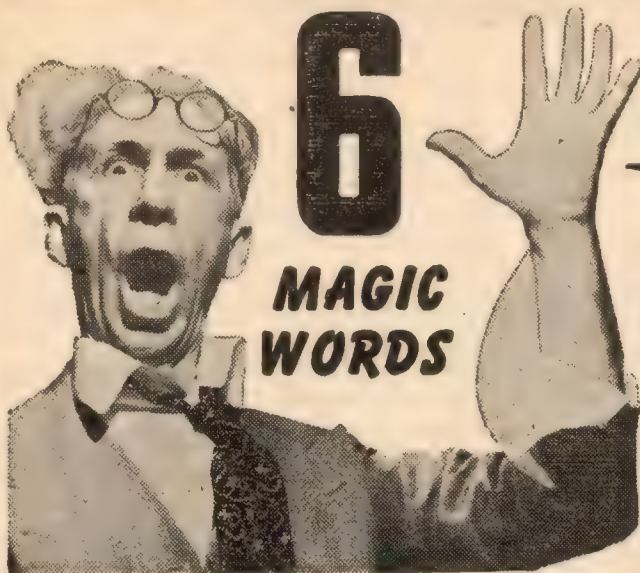
It was Deputy Rupe Sims who'd worked on the killing, because the sheriff had been out of town at the time. Ed found out, too, that the sheriff and Rupe Sims were close as brothers.

Ed Dolson grinned as he scratched out the note that Sheriff Tanner would get in the morning:

You've got an awful fool as deputy. When he tried to frame Nueces Dolson in that stage killing, he forgot to clean up after himself. The grand jury will sure like to see what I found on the Greenwood road. Yours sincerely, E. Dolson.

He waited around town and saw Rupe Sims go into the sheriff's office like he'd

(Continued on page 12)



6

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(Continued from page 10)

been sent for in a hurry. What went on behind those closed doors he couldn't hear, but he guessed that it was plenty, for when Sims came out Ed noticed that the deputy's face was red as fire.

At night he saw Sims make a great show of going somewhere. He rode his pony around in front of the sheriff's office and got out a saddle gun and a pack of grub. Then he started off.

He took the Greenwood road, with Ed Dolson following behind him. Before he'd gotten very far, Ed cut off into the brush at the trailside and held the muzzle of his horse so he wouldn't make any noise. Pretty soon Sheriff Tanner rode along following the deputy's trail.

After Tanner had gotten well out of sight, Ed continued as quietly as he could. He dismounted again at the spot of the stickup, making a good deal of noise, and muttering to himself. Purposely, he'd left his gun and belt back home. But he carried a fully loaded short-barreled bulldog.

It was Sims' voice that said, "Dolson! Say, I been wanting to see you. What the hell did you mean by that note?"

"Note?" questioned Ed Dolson. "Oh, yeah." He began to laugh. "Why, that was just sort of a joke. Only, Sims, you're so dumb you got to hunt for the point, savvy? I ain't givin' up any head just because—"

If Ed Dolson hadn't been expecting it, he'd have been beefed then and there. But it wasn't Sims' gun that blazed toward where, a moment before, Ed's back had been. Ed whirled, half fell, and cut loose with the short-barreled .45. He heard Tanner curse, and knew the sheriff was hit. Then he and Sims were shooting it out. . . .

Later, Ed Dolson flung the dead body of the sheriff over the cantle and turned to Sims. "I'll do my damndest to see that you don't hang, Sims, if you'll make a full confession," he said. "I've got enough to send you to the gallows, anyhow, but I want you to tell it to me, back in town."

The deputy gave up head—plenty. Nueces had been threatened that night when Ed Dolson had ridden away. Sims, following Ed's tracks to the little ranch house, had believed old Nueces when, defending the son who'd ridden away, he'd said that he himself had been out riding near the stage. Shots had been fired at it as it passed through a lonely gulch. Then the stickup bandit must have turned yellow, for the robbery never came off. After listening to Nueces, Sims believed that the old cowman had been the one who had attempted the stage holdup, and the deputy had begun to get ideas right then.

It had taken everything that old Nueces had to clear himself of that charge of attempted robbery, and to safeguard his son's name. Then came the frameup, and the planted stage money.

Ed Dolson went up that night with the prosecuting attorney and the judge to get old Nueces back to his ranch. And there in the soft moonlight, old Nueces Dolson smiled for the first time in a month.

"It's a pretty good place to come back to, son," he said.

"With you for a partner, Dad," Ed Dolson said in a low voice, "it's a place never to leave. And we'll make a go of it—together."

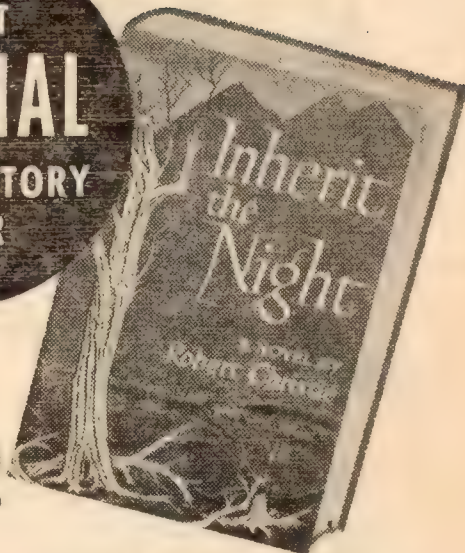
Old Nueces said nothing at all. He didn't have to—for the look of happiness in his faded eyes was like nothing Ed had ever seen before. . . .

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HIGH VALLEY DIES HARD!

CHAPTER 1

Tyrant's Range

THE wagon was heavily loaded with the supplies, tools, and ore-mill machinery that Gil Clayton had bought in Tucson for a mine he had never seen. It moved slowly at first, down the steep pitch of the arroyo's bank, with the tree that had been chained behind for a drag stirring dust

*With her pride in her hands, she came to him—the once-haughty mistress of a vast cattle empire. For only Gil Clayton—her bitterest enemy—could save the Walking
W now!*



Smashing Saga of a Southwest Feud

**By KENNETH L.
SINCLAIR**



He said, "Not this time, honey," and disengaged her hand.

that lingered in the baking air. Clayton, riding behind the wagon, had a rope on the tree, its end dallied to his saddlehorn for what little extra drag he could supply. Old "Powder Johnny" Goren braced himself on the driver's seat, three pairs of lines wrapped about his knotty hands. Lon Ames, beside Goren, put his wiry strength against the brake lever.

When the wagon was only part way down the slope, the drag chain parted.

Goren swung a startled glance to the rear. He shouted and stood up, massive shoulders working as he sawed the lines to force the horses back against their breechstraps in an effort to check the wagon's run. Lon Ames locked the wheels.

All that was of little use. Even with its rear wheels sliding, the wagon gained speed, slewing sidewise as it approached the boulder-strewn bottom of the arroyo.

Gil Clayton swore helplessly and threw off his dallies and cast aside his now-useless rope. He could only watch while the wagon hit bottom and a front wheel struck a boulder and collapsed with a splintering sound. The wagon lurched far over and came to a halt in a swirl of dust.

Powder Johnny jumped down to quiet his horses, then knelt and inspected the ruin of the wheel. He spat and turned his seamy face toward Gil as the younger man dismounted nearby. "Comes of tryin' to push on in this blasted heat," he said dourly. "We should of camped back there on the flat like I said."

Gil pushed back his hat and wiped dust and sweat from the lean, strong planes of his face. He was a six-footer, with very black hair and dark, smiling eyes that women did not soon forget. At twenty-eight, he had knocked around sufficiently to know that things were rarely as bad as they seemed. He grinned and said, "You weren't fooling me any, Johnny. You wanted to camp early so you could borrow my horse and make a quick run on to town and find a whiskey mill."

Goren wiped his mouth with the back of a hand that lacked a forefinger—a defective dynamite cap had exacted that price from him. "All right," he said, shrugging. "We're sure as hell camped now. How about the lend of that mount? While I'm about it I can ask around an' find if there's a blacksmith in that town of yours, to fix this wheel. What'd you say its name was?"

"Sentinel." The name aroused a stir of feeling within Gil Clayton. The old bitterness was ten years behind him now, yet its roots were deeper, perhaps, than he had suspected. He looked around. They were broken down on Walking W range; and he felt the old, edgy wariness of those who trespassed on the land that Big Ed Waltheu said was his. Gil added, "It's late in the day to be starting that ride, Johnny. We'll cut a pry-pole and lift that axle and get the wheel off."

Goren sighed. He squinted up toward young Lon Ames, who remained on the wagon seat, still white-faced from the scare he'd had. "You aim to just sit there an' be useless?" Goren demanded roughly.

The kid scrambled down. He was seventeen but looked even younger. Gil and Johnny had found him, homeless and half starved, in the mining camp where their last jobs had petered out. They had pooled their resources to put beefsteaks into him. If they spoke to him in the rough manner of their kind, it was with affection nonetheless.

Powder Johnny told the kid to get an axe from the tarp-covered load and cut a pole. He eyed the kid's shaggy mane of straw-colored hair, as young Lon set out, and he grumbled to Gil, "We'll have to get him a haircut right soon."

Gil nodded. The kid gave them both a fatherly feeling, and they liked it more than they would tell.

They had a pry under the axle and were putting their weight to it in unison while Lon strove to shove under a supporting rock, when the wizened little man rode in.

HIS horse carried the Walking W burn. His face, under the up-curved brim of his hat, was darkly weathered and somehow ageless. His slaty eyes held no expression at all as he reined up, drew his gun from an oiled holster, and said, "You pilgrims are on Walkin' W ground."

Gil let go of the pry pole and turned to face the rider. He said, "We're not cattlemen, friend, if that's what worries you. We're miners, just passing through."

The gunman gave his head a barely perceptible shake. "Not through here. You got five minutes to hitch up those teams an' get that rig headed back out."

Powder Johnny said, with heavy restraint, "Take a look at that wheel, mister. We ain't in any shape to travel."

The wizened man came down from his saddle, catlike, and moved forward with the gun tilted to a ready angle in his hand. "Leave the rig, then. Move out. I don't tell a man twice."

Johnny's broad, battered jaw hardened. Keeping his grip on the long pry pole, he said to Gil, "Big talk, small man."

Gil made a warning gesture. He checked the wrath that was rising within him—this was High Valley as he remembered it. The arrogant bossing, the ordering out of lesser men. Big Ed had been laying down the law ten years ago when he charged the Claytons with widelooping and ran them out. He still operated, it seemed, in the same manner.

Gil held his voice on a placating level. "We're going to Silver Queen to work in the mine, friend. We'll do no harm at all to Walking W graze."

The wizened head jerked impatiently. The gunman was confident, and he was coming in close; he was nearly opposite the end of the pry pole which had been buried in the sand by Gil's and Johnny's efforts to lift the axle a little higher. He said, "The word is that no miner goes through. That plain enough for your savvy?"

Gil frowned. Big Ed Wakthrew was a

range hog, or a man defending what was his—depending on how you looked at it. Big Ed had been the first to throw cattle into High Valley, and the little outfits had come later. But graze had been all that concerned him ten years ago. What was his quarrel with miners now?

Before Gil could voice that question, Powder Johnny moved. With a quickness that was incredible in one of his broad and stocky build, he flipped the pry pole up and over as easily as if it had been a match, so that it struck the wizened hombre's gun arm.

The man gave a cry of pain and surprise. He had been sure of himself in the face of this obviously unarmed pair, and his attention had been on Gil. Now he twitched around toward Johnny, blinking his eyes and clutching at his injured arm with his free hand. He triggered a shot that went wild.

Gil leaped forward. Johnny's move had been a foolishly risky one, but the thing was done now. Gil reached the little man, marveling that he had felt no impact of lead, and wrenched the gun from the man and tossed it away. With long, jolting blows he drove him back.

He was astonished to find almost no resistance in the man. When the hombre did try to fight back, his blows missed Gil altogether. When he went down he writhed in pain and seemed almost to whimper.

Breathing hard, Gil stared at him and saw the reason for the luck he'd had. The pry pole that Johnny had heaved had thrown sand in the gunman's face, temporarily blinding him.

Now Johnny was at Gil's side, gathering himself to jump and use his boots on the downed man. "Pull a gun on us, will he?" Johnny said. "I'll learn the dried-up little son to—"

"No." Gil put out an arm, stopping his companion. "You've done enough. You'll get lead in you some day, making fool moves like that. He's my man now." Gil

stepped forward and hauled the little man to his feet and, holding him with one hand, slapped him repeatedly with the other.

A girl's voice cried, "Stop that!"

WITHOUT releasing his opponent, Gil Clayton turned his head and looked at the girl who sat her horse on the high bank of the arroyo. She had a rifle, its barrel sawed off to stub length for easy carrying, in her hands. She wore a man's range clothing, dusty and brush-torn here and there. Her hat hung across her shoulders, supported by the *barbiquejo* that passed under her small, determined chin. Her short-cut auburn hair was stirred by the wind, accenting the taut defiance to all the world that was in her manner.

She cried again, "Stop that, I said! Turn loose of him!"

Gil released the gunman and shoved him away. The little hombre fell back, peering up toward the girl; he seemed more afraid of her than of Gil. He licked a bleeding lip and said, "Miss Erna, they got my gun from me."

"Did they!" Her voice was sharp with scorn. "Ruby, get out of here. I'll handle these pilgrims myself."

The wizened hombre sent one regretful glance toward his gun, lying there among the rocks, and then mounted up and rode away.

Powder Johnny bent a lifted-eyebrow glance toward Gil. "Hear that? You just mauled Ruby Sleeson!"

Gil nodded. It wasn't likely that there was more than one man with a given name like that. Sleeson they knew by reputation; a gunman, a killer who was for hire to any who would pay his prices. He had been at a disadvantage against a pair who'd been quickened and toughened by mining-camp brawls, and who fought with their fists. But to Gil's mind the big point was that Big Ed Walthew was hiring expensive talent these days.

The girl was Erna Walthew—though he

would not have recognized her at all. He remembered a gangly tomboy, some four years younger than himself, who never for a minute forgot that she was Big Ed's daughter, who rode everywhere at a head-long gallop on the Arabian horse that her father had bought for her.

When he thought of her at all, during the years he had been away from High Valley, he had visioned her as an imperious range queen. Married, perhaps, to some hombre whose wealth made a suitable match for the power that Big Ed must have built for himself by now.

From tattered newspapers that had passed through a hundred hands in the camps, he had learned that Big Ed had been president of the Cattlemen's Association for awhile, and had served two terms in the Territorial Legislature. Seeing his daughter thus, in range clothes and with unmistakable rope burns on her hands, puzzled Gil.

She kept her regard upon him. Now her brown eyes widened a bit and she said, "Gil Clayton."

He nodded and touched his hat. "Powder Johnny Goren here, and Lon Ames. We're on our way to Silver Queen, but we had a smashup and your man seemed too impatient to savvy that we can't move until we get this wheel to a blacksmith."

"He had his orders," the girl said.

Gil's mouth tightened. "I pointed out to him that we're not bringing in cattle. We're miners on the move."

"Miners!" She spoke the word as if it signified something loathsome. Her slim body stirred angrily in the saddle. "I'll tell you why we don't want miners here. We've got wells that have gone dry one by one. We've had to sell off most of our range stock at the bottom of the market. We stand to lose the rest unless—" She bit her lip, then straightened her shoulders. "The mine put down a big well. It's four hundred feet deep and they pump half a million gallons a day out of it. Now do you under-

stand what has happened to High Valley?"

Gil nodded. An ore mill of the capacity that the Silver Queen was reputed to have would need that much water. When the additional machinery in the wagon was installed, it would need more. And in this mountain country of Arizona a well had to go deep in order to reach water in volume. He said, "Their well is up at the head of the valley, isn't it? It's dropped the water level out from under you?"

"Yes." She lifted a hand tiredly and touched her forehead. "The drillers that Dad had come in said that there used to be an underground river in the valley. The mine's well has dried it up. We've drilled as deep as we can go, in a dozen places, and got nothing."

The picture of Big Ed Walthew with his back to the wall was a new thing to Gil; it needed getting used to. Another man might have found petty satisfaction in it, but Gil said, "I'm sorry," and meant it. Then he added, "But we've got to get to the mine. We've got jobs up there. I'm going to run their ore mill for them."

She thrust the rifle into its short saddle boot. "I'll not argue with you. You can camp here, I guess. Tren Vance, who's our foreman now, is in town today—if you ride right in you can catch him and see about going through. He's in charge of such matters." She reined her horse away, paused for a moment as if to say more, then put the animal to a gallop.

Lon Ames breathed, "She's beautiful!"

Gil looked at the kid sharply. He hadn't thought of Erna Walthew as being beautiful at all. He had hardly thought of her as a woman, except in mild wonder at the fact that she was trying to do a man's work on the range while Big Ed put his payroll money into the hire of a man like Ruby Sleson.

"I'll ride to town and see this man Vance," Gil said.

Powder Johnny picked up the gun that had been taken from Sleson. "I'll go with

you. I'll slip the harness of a draft horse an' ride bareback—we can tie the wheel on 'im somehow. Lon, there's a rifle in that load. Dig it out an' keep watch here while we're gone."

Johnny rubbed a hand along his beard-stubbed jaw. "Mind you, we took Ruby Sleson's gun from 'im! Must be I've beat on hard rock so long it's softened my brains. But he seemed so little an' dried up that I figured we ought to call his bluff. One thing's sure, he'll be layin' for us first chance he gets. I should have busted that arm of his complete while I was about it."

CHAPTER 2

Big Ed's Town

SENTINEL had changed but little. It remained a cowtown, pure and simple—a few shacks, a few false-fronted business buildings, a rickety corral where stock could be assembled for visiting cattle buyers. There were no signs of a boom here. Silver Queen was ten miles away at least—too far for its sudden prosperity to reach Sentinel—and in addition there was Big Ed's rigid exclusion of miners from his domain.

This was Big Ed's town.

Lang Tilcott, the blacksmith, rubbed his palms on his leather apron and looked at the wheel and shook his head. He remembered Gil at once; he asked about Gil's mother and father.

"Both dead, Lang," Gil said. "Dad went to work in a mine after we left here, and was killed in a cave-in. Mother died two years ago."

Tilcott shook his head. "Too bad. Your brothers?"

"Drifted away. I've lost track of them."

"Hell. Your old man had a good start here—trouble was, he tried to build his outfit up, an' that didn't suit Big Ed's notions." The smith glanced around as if he had said too much and was afraid of being

overheard. He rubbed his palms on his apron again. "About this here wheel, now—with you headin' to the mine like you say, I oughtn't to do a thing with it until I get the nod from Tren Vance."

Powder Johnny made a growling sound. Gil asked, with an edge of anger in his voice, "Where do we find this Vance?"

"He's around town today," Tiltcott said. "Big Ed, he got throwed an' stomped by a bronc an' can't leave that *casa* of his any more. Vance runs things, an' with the water situation like it is, he's plenty touchy. You be careful how you go at him—he's an old-time cowman, tough an' mean when he takes the notion to be. I reckon you savvy how it is with me here. I got a livin' to make an' can't afford to have Walkin' W down on me."

Gil nodded and turned away. In one regard High Valley had changed not at all; men still ran cattle and did business by permission of the Walking W. The change had been in Big Ed's fortunes. With his wells dried up by the mine, Walthew was, without doubt, more harsh than ever.

On Powder Johnny's insistence Gil went to the Mercantile, where he bought a Colt, a .44 caliber to match Sleeson's weapon, which Johnny had shoved under his belt. Also he bought a holster, belt, and a box of shells. On the broad porch of the store he strapped the belt about his lean hips and slid the loaded weapon into the holster.

The weight of it, slung about him thus, was a new thing. He had been too young to carry a gun when he lived in High Valley before, although his brothers had carried them. And in the mining camps a man used his fists and his boots. In the camps a man's feeling was one of rootlessness—a don't-give-a-damn slant on life and living that had perhaps been good medicine for a youth whose memories of High Valley were bitter ones.

His recollection had been of a night when riders swarmed around the Clayton ranch house. There had been accusations

of mavericking, and angry denials. One of Gil's older brothers had tried to bring a gun into play and had been wounded. The Claytons had been given time only to load a few of their household possessions into a wagon; then they had been driven from the valley.

In the camps a man could come near to forgetting the past. He could work and he could brawl. He could live for the present. Gil Clayton had done that, enjoying the hard life, growing to manhood in the camps, his lean, broad-shouldered frame a magnet for the smiles of the painted women.

He had worked hard and he had played hard. And he had been lucky. Apprenticed to the operator of an ore mill, he had just rounded out a year of learning the business when the operator died and Gil was placed in full charge. He had kept on learning—the milling of ore was a complicated business that a man could not expect to learn fully in less than a lifetime.

Without consciously going after it, he had built a reputation for himself. He never worried about the closing down of the mine where he worked; there were always other jobs.

But always he maintained just one link with the past. He kept a saddlehorse, often at considerable cost for feed, because the old fondness for riding lingered within him.

Now he stalked along the street of Sentinel, hard and lean and able, with Powder Johnny Goren at his side. They made inquiries for Tren Vance but were unable to locate the man.

At the long hitch-pole in front of Sam Ryan's Bottom Dollar Saloon, a number of Walking W horses switched their tails at flies in the low-slanting afternoon sunlight. Powder Johnny had no eye for brand reading, but he wiped his mouth hopefully.

Gil nodded and they crossed the street.

IN SPITE of the number of horses at the rack, the saloon was nearly empty. Pink-faced little Sam Ryan was wiping glasses

and stacking them carefully on the back-bar. Only two men were drinking, widely apart at the bar, in moody silence.

Ryan caught Gil's reflection in the mirror and faced around. "Gil Clayton!" he said, putting his hand across the bar. "Hell, I remember you as a starved-looking kid that owned a horse but no saddle. What brings you back to—"

He was interrupted by one of the men at the bar, who had put down his glass with exaggerated care and now came forward, weaving slightly. "A Clayton," the hombre said. "Damned if it isn't a Clayton. Come back to gloat over us, eh?"

Gil did not turn his head at once. He said to Sam Ryan, "Whiskey, Sam, for me and my friend here." While Ryan poured two shot-glasses full, Gil turned to face the man who had interrupted them.

The man was Brett Walthew, Erna's brother. He was of Gil's age, though slighter in build. His hat was tilted back from a thin face that had been made smooth by easy living, and he wore a carefully tended tan mustache and sideburns. He held his head with a high and arrogant tilt. His cheeks were flushed, perhaps from the liquor that was in him and perhaps from the fact that he, a Walthew, had been made to wait his turn.

Gil said, "Howdy, Brett. Meet Johnny Goren. Have a drink with us?"

For a moment Brett seemed about to refuse. Then amusement came into his eyes—they were brown flecked with gold, like his sister's—and he said, "A Clayton and a Walthew, eh? Why not? The Old Man gave you Claytons a rough deal."

Gil nodded drily. "Johnny and I are on the way to work at Silver Queen. We broke a wagon wheel in Deep Arroyo and we're told we've got to get Tren Vance's okay before we can get it fixed."

Brett nodded, his mouth a bitter and discontented line. "Tren's the man to see. But if you're going to that mine you'll play hell getting past him."

Gil glanced sharply at Brett, analyzing the man. At once he knew the reason why Big Ed Walthew had not trusted to his son the job of leading his crew. Brett was soft. He lacked the punch a man needed to ram-rod an outfit like the Walking W in the situation it now faced.

Gil said, "We want no fight with anybody, but we aim to go through. We didn't even know about the water, till Erna told us at the arroyo."

"You've seen her, eh?" Brett downed his drink and slapped his palm on the bar in an unspoken order for another. "The poor kid is working herself to death trying to save what stock we haven't had to sell to pay for those dry holes in the ground. No use. Not a bit of use. When the water's gone you're out of the cattle business. It's hell, seeing a big outfit like the Walking W go down. You really should be gloating, Clayton."

"Can't you force the mine to give you water?"

Brett laughed shortly. "With Stacey Brinton, the Silver Queen's manager, backed by a few millions and willing to use 'em to fight us in any dirty way he can? Oh, we tried it in court. Brinton's lawyers made monkeys out of us. The well's nine miles from us and it's hard to prove where that water went to. All we had to put up was a drillers' theory, and it wasn't enough. But Brinton's willing to toss us a bone. He'll buy us out—for a song! We're not taking that hook, though; if we sell to him there'd be no hope of ever collecting damages. Though there's mighty little hope in any case."

Gil nodded, absently watching Sam Ryan begin his evening chore of lighting the saloon lamps. Mining camp talk was that the Silver Queen strike was a big one—some said it would be bigger than the Comstock. Certainly there was money behind it. When Gil had heard about the mill job that was open here, he had written to apply for it, partly out of a half-formed desire to

see High Valley again but with little hope that he would be hired, since he was not acquainted with Brinton, the manager. Brinton had surprised him somewhat by sending him a month's pay and a list of the milling machinery that he was to buy and freight in, and a letter giving him authority to make the purchase on the Silver Queen account. Brinton was big—too big for the Walking W to handle.

The man who had been drinking alone near the far end of the bar put down his glass and slouched toward the door. As he passed, Gil recognized him. The man was Sim Burgee, one of the small ranchers in the valley, a stooped and bearded man whose eyes seemed even more sunken and brooding than they had been. Gil turned and offered his hand, smiling in greeting. Burgee only nodded, then spat and went out.

Brett Walthew chuckled. "He doesn't like the company you keep, Clayton."

The rancher had hardly reached the street when a shout arose out there. "Burg-gee!" a bull-like voice bawled. "Don't try to get on that horse! I've got men behind you, Burgee!"

Gil gave Brett Walthew a quick glance. Brett shrugged and said, "Like old times, eh? Burgee's been selling beef to the miners, though he was warned not to. Tren's notion is that it wasn't all Burgee's own beef, either." Brett reached for the bottle and poured himself another drink. His hand was unsteady.

Gil and Powder Johnny exchanged looks, then swung and went out.

DUSK, and the first coolness of evening, had flowed into the street of Sentinel. Sim Burgee's horse had sensed danger and had swung away from him, head high, tugging at reins which still were looped about the pole. The rancher stood in the gap thus formed among the uneasy mounts, his shoulders pulled down and his fingers splayed stiffly near his gaunt thighs. His

bearded face was intent upon the man who had taken a position in the middle of the street.

The hombre in the street had his battered hat cocked to one side on a head of bristly dark hair. His boots were spread apart in the dust. His leathery face was unlined, yet old—seemingly a lifetime of hard work had worn him down until only the stubborn, rock-hard core of the man was left. He called:

"Burg-gee, last night you shoved a bunch of beefs up to Silver Queen. Today you been spendin' money like it was water. How many of them beefs was in the Walk-in' W brand, hey? Burgee, you're all through here. Draw, crawl or run—you're finished."

The rancher's voice was shrill with tension. "Damn you, Vance, a man's got to live! What I sold was my own beef. If it's Walkin' W's idee a man should stand by an' watch his stock die off when he can get somethin' out of it by—"

"You can't stop miners by puttin' beef in their bellies," Vance said flatly. "An' it ain't ever to be Walkin' W beef they feed on, you thievin' scum!"

Burg-gee's head came up. "I've told you whose beef that was! I'm done with askin' Walkin' W's permission every time I spit. I—"

"Back your talk," Vance snapped. "Pull iron, rustler—or do I put a rope on you an' drag you behind a horse like you got comin' to you?"

Burg-gee stirred uncertainly. Licking his lips he glanced over his shoulders, first to right and then to the left.

Gil Clayton, with Johnny at his side, had swung the batwing doors of the saloon open and had paused there. Gil saw, now, that Vance had a man staked out at either end of the saloon porch. The man nearest to Gil had one booted foot on a bench and was leaning forward, his arms resting lightly across his knee. The man at the other end of the porch was leaning against the corner

of the building, dourly casual while he rolled himself a smoke.

The man at Gil's end jerked his head meaningly, ordering the two strangers to get themselves out of the line of fire.

Gil said softly, "Put your gun on that tall one, Johnny. Careful, now." Then he drew his new .44 and stepped out from behind the door, his weapon leveled upon the man who had his boot on the bench.

The man jerked with astonishment, then straightened carefully and lifted his hands.

Gil heard a subdued cursing at the far end of the porch and concluded that the other man, too, had been unready for the idea that anyone would pull a gun on a Walking W hand.

Gil called, "Nobody behind you now, Burgee. This is Gil Clayton talking. Vance is your turkey."

The rancher didn't draw. He made a sick, sighing sound; and out of the corner of his eye Gil saw the man wrench his reins from the pole and swing into saddle and ride in a quickening run down the street, his long legs raking the spurs along the sides of his mount.

Tren Vance swore. He said savagely, "Lute, Roy, pull out of here. I'll deal with these meddlesome pilgrims."

The two cowboys sidled from the saloon porch and disappeared around the corners of the building. Gil holstered his gun, turning to face the Walking W ramrod.

Vance was standing rigid, holding an angrily accusing glare upon Gil. "That places you, mister," he said. "Puttin' in for a sneakin' widelooper!"

"I didn't hear that proved," Gil said. "Old man, you've had some tough going and it's warped your judgment. You're talking wild and not thinking any too straight. You've got the look of an old-time cowman but you've slipped pretty far, to stake out a couple of hombres behind a man before you call him. Maybe you're just not sure of yourself any more, is that it? In the days when I knew the Walking W,

it didn't need to make setups and it didn't need an out-and-out gunman like Ruby Sleson in its hire to help it get its way."

Vance's face darkened. "We do what we got to do," he rumbled, oddly on the defensive now. "Your name's Clayton—that



Tren Vance

right? Blackleg cattleman, turned miner. Brand-new gun. Brand-new belt to go with it. Hell, where I come from, your kind—"

"You've got my name right," Gil cut in. "I horned into this deal here because it looked dirty to me. My friend and I are going through to the mine. We don't want trouble, but if you think it's worth your while to stand in our way we'll give you more trouble than your hat can hold."

Vance's brows lifted. His hand strayed almost imperceptibly toward his gun, which rode in a tied-down holster, and for a moment an odd sort of gladness flickered in his expression. But then he was glum again. He scowled and said:

"Tough ones, hey? Young feller, you don't scare me a little bit. You had some luck with Ruby—maybe it went to your head. Now it so happens I'm goin' to let you go through. Never mind why. But

here's a piece of advice to go with the favor—" He aimed a blunt forefinger toward Gil. "Turn on us, cross Walkin' W in any way, an' I'll find it a pleasure to kill you. Now get that wagon of yours fixed an' roll it!"

CHAPTER 3

Boss of Silver Queen

FOR a moment Gil couldn't believe that he had heard right. Vance seemed tough and rock-hard—certainly not the bending kind. And Gil had goaded him by impulsively putting in for Sim Burgee. Why was Vance letting him go through?

As the Walking W ramrod swung away and marched up the street, Gil thought he knew the answer. Erna Walthew was on the porch of the Mercantile; Vance, as he passed, spoke a grumpy word to the girl and she nodded in reply, smiling faintly.

Then she glanced briefly toward Gil, her chin high and her manner subtly triumphant in the gathering dusk.

She had spoken to Tren Vance, had asked him to let Gil go through. It seemed the only possible answer. But why had she done it? Gil had never been particularly friendly with her in the old days. His had been a somber boyhood; she had been a thin, nervous, prideful brat with pigtails. Now she was greatly changed, filled out in a manner that her attire could not fully conceal, but there were rope burns on her hands and certainly she had no time for sentiment, even if there had been such.

Before Gil could cross the street and speak to her, however, she had mounted her horse and was gone, riding out of the town at a headlong gallop.

Gil still felt puzzled and unsure that night, when he watched the blacksmith work on the wheel. He felt no better later in the gray cold dawn, when Johnny and Lon and himself wrestled the wheel onto the skein and hitched up the team and

started moving again. As before, Gil rode alongside the wagon.

Johnny said, "That Vance, he ain't the kind to let us off so easy. Could be he likes a sure thing, the way he set things up for that rancher in town. Be a sight easier an' safer for him to put Ruby Sleeson onto us than tackle us himself in the open, hey? Gil, we better keep our eyes open."

Gil nodded and rode ahead of the wagon, his hand close to his gun and his eyes scanning the hilltops on either side for signs of danger.

He had been sure that the girl had been responsible for Vance's action. But now Johnny had suggested another possible explanation.

But no attack took place. As the day progressed they moved steadily up the valley, passing gaunt, weakly bellowing cattle clustered about windmills where the water troughs were dry.

Gil's jaw tightened. He had put the cattle business behind him. More than any man, perhaps, he had reason to find satisfaction in the Walking W's troubles. But satisfaction wouldn't come. As Brett Walthew had said, it was hell to see a big outfit go down.

It wasn't a matter of regretting the Walthews' misfortune at all. Regardless of how it had been built and how it maintained its lead, the Walking W stood for something. It meant jobs for men. It meant thousands of cattle, which should be grazing on the rich grass that still, because it depended on rain and not on the water deep in the earth, grew the length and breadth of the valley. But without water this graze was useless. High Valley would go back to what it had been before the cattlemen came—and no one who had ever been a stockman could look upon this without a feeling of loss.

In mid-afternoon they passed the mine's big pump, its chimney towering into the sky and its walking beam working ceaselessly as it lifted water out of the earth and sent it through a pipeline to the mine and

the mill and the new town that now was visible at the end of the valley.

They reached the town just at sundown. They'd had no trouble at all. Powder Johnny gave his head a doubtful shake as Gil reined in beside the wagon.

"Too easy," Johnny said. "Mark it down, Gil, they didn't let us through because they was scared of us, nor because they took a likin' to our looks. We ain't finished with Ruby Sleson yet."

Gil nodded grimly, and jogged his horse.

A big banner, stretched high across the street of the town, proclaimed:

WELCOME TO SILVER QUEEN

At the foot of the bonanza mountain

Pop. 850

Lots \$400—see Fahler and Kelly

Tent-houses, a few frame dwellings and some hastily-erected adobes lined the single street. Jangling music came from big tent saloons. A woman's laughter, sudden and shrill and drunken, reached Gil's ears. Men moved restlessly from saloon to saloon. This was a town in the grip of the feverish expectancy of sudden wealth.

Another boomtown, and thus familiar to Gil-Clayton. A year from now—or even a month from now—all might be desertion here. But for the present Silver Queen had men, movement, and money.

A gleaming black carriage, drawn by matched bays and driven by a man in livery, wheeled into the busy street. It carried a woman dressed in fashionable silk. She had been riding out in the valley, Gil concluded; she still shielded her head with a frilly parasol so that he could not see her face. From the proud poise of her body, she was young. And not a camp woman, surely. Gil watched while the carriage swung up the street, climbing the long grade of the mountain slope.

AN HOUR later he climbed that slope afoot. He had left Powder Johnny and young Lon and the outfit at the O. K. Cor-

ral, after a greasy and unappetizing meal at a camp restaurant, and had asked directions to Stacey Brinton's office.

It was a compact brick building with big windows and a look of permanence, set apart from the town at the high end of the street. Above it was a barbed wire fence with a gate that was patrolled by a pair of watchful guards with rifles on their arms. Beyond the gate the road snaked back and forth as the slope steepened, passing a new sheet-iron building that plainly was the mill, reaching on upward to the four tunnels, marked by long tailings dumps, that had been punched into the mountain at the base of the highest cliff.

The carriage that Gil had seen stood in front of Stacey Brinton's office, its horses slack-hipped and its driver lolling in the seat.

Another man lounged at the door of the office. He was big, with bushy black brows and a pair of very long arms. He only nodded, stupidly, when Gil asked whether this was Brinton's place.

Gil went in. He found a small room with a low railing and a desk and a chair, plainly for the use of a clerk who now had gone home for the day. He pushed open the gate in the railing and knocked on the door of the inner office.

A man's voice called, "Who's there?"

"Clayton. The mill man you hired."

After a short pause the voice said, "Come right in, Clayton."

Gil pushed the door open. A man whose head seemed too large for one of his stocky build was seating himself at the desk. He was about forty and well groomed; but what arrested Gil's attention was the man's oddly boyish look. The bulging forehead, the heavy-lidded eyes and the thick lips seemed to build along toward that effect. Perhaps the high, tight celluloid collar helped it too.

The girl whom Gil had seen in the carriage was standing near the wide window, her hands lifted to adjust the filmy and ridiculous brim of her hat. Her gleaming

blonde hair was drawn back and done in a tiny bun at her neck. Her dress had a demurely high neckline, yet it clung to her curves in an artful way that said it had cost plenty. There was color in her cheeks and she was laughing a little as if to cover some small embarrassment.

Without rising, Brinton offered his hand to Gil across the desk. "Glad you were able to get through, Clayton. Lenora, this is our new mill manager, Gil Clayton."

The girl turned and smiled, frankly appraising Gil with cool blue eyes that held hints of amusement.

He was suddenly aware of his rough, dusty, sweat-stained appearance.

Brinton chuckled. "She's real, Clayton—no need to gape! Miss Tashman is here with her uncle, who's head of the stockholders' committee. Better run along now, Lenora. This is a business matter and wouldn't interest you."

She picked up her white gloves from the desk and moved past Gil to the door. She paused there, glancing back toward Brinton. "We'll see you tonight, darling?" she asked. "At dinner?"

Brinton nodded and chuckled. "I'm at your command, my dear."

WHEN the girl was gone, Brinton leaned back in his chair and asked, "Have any trouble in the valley?"

"A little." Gil tapped the stock of the .44. "That's why I bought this. The cattlemen didn't want to let us through."

"Perhaps I should have warned you about that. They claim we're stealing their water, but they haven't a leg to stand on. They're unimportant. Your job, Clayton, is to get the mill set up properly and running—the stockholders want to see some silver. The last mill man we had made a mess of things and I had to discharge him."

"You'll have to ship the concentrates out to a smelter," Gil said. "Through the valley."

"No." Brinton shook his head, passing

his fingers through his shock of thick hair that increased his baffling resemblance to a boy grown to man's stature. "We don't need to go out through the valley. We've built a trail over the mountains, by-passing Sentinel, and we've got a Mexican packer with a bunch of burros. He brings in our supplies, and can take out the concentrates. But the first hurdle is to get those concentrates. We've got to prove to the stockholders that the Silver Queen will produce."

Gil said, "If your ore carries the values I can—"

Brinton waved a hand to silence him. "Forget about the ore. Forget about those cattlemen too—we can always hire men to handle the dangerous jobs if need be, you know." His heavy lids lowered and his eyes—not boyish at all now, but very old—studied Gil. "The point is, how far can I trust you?"

Gil was startled. The man had hired him by letter and had authorized him to spend upwards of five thousand dollars for machinery. That had seemed an indication of trust freely placed. He said, "Those references I sent you—"

"Not what I mean. Not what I mean at all. Getting ore out of the ground is easy—getting metal out of the ore is what counts. We're capitalized at more than a million here and there's more money waiting to be thrown into the pot. The deal hinges on what happens in that mill." Abruptly, Brinton's thick lips parted in a lazily confident smile. "But you can handle the matter, I'm sure. Here are the keys to the mill. I'm giving you a free hand up there, Clayton. You can sleep in the mill if you like."

Gil took the keys. "I've got a couple of others with me," he said. "A kid who'll be handy around the mill, and Powder Johnny Goren, a hardrock man who can drive a drift farther ahead in a day than anyone else you can get."

Brinton shook his head. "I don't need

any tunnel men. Put them both on at the mill. See the timekeeper tomorrow and put them on at whatever figure you think is fair." He made a gesture of dismissal.

When Gil walked back down into the noisy boomtown he was frowning. Brinton had seemed to lead up to things, and hadn't gotten them said. The man's gnome-like, boyish appearance hadn't blinded Gil—Brinton liked the feeling of power, and there was steel in him to back it up.

Gil shrugged and permitted his thinking to swing to Lenora Tashman, whose fresh loveliness was of a kind that a mining man rarely saw.

THE next days were busy ones. The mill was in a long building made of sheet-iron on a wood framework. Along the up-slope side of the building was a high bunker topped by the timber framework to which were secured the cables of the tramways that led down from the tunnel entrances of the mine. Ore buckets journeyed endlessly up and down, dumping their loads into the bunkers automatically and with rumbling impacts that shook the building.

Inside the mill everything was wrong.

There was a crusher and a rod mill to pulverize the ore, and five twenty-foot riffle tables, all driven by belts from a line shaft that was turned by a steam engine at the end of the building. But the arrangement was awkward and the riffles were placed at so steep an angle that most of the concentrates would be lost.

Gil determined to tear out the entire set-up, install the new flotation cells he had brought in the wagon, and place the riffles at a more useful angle.

But first, being mining men, they looked at the ore. Powder Johnny lifted the door of the hopper that led down from the outside bunkers and took out several pieces of rock.

He grunted in satisfaction. "Sulphides, Gil. Bonanza stuff, all right!"

Gil nodded, and a part of the vague un-

easiness that had gripped him since coming to Silver Queen dropped away. The ore was here and there was work to do. In work, a man could forget many things.

He wondered if he could forget the way the mine was pumping the life out of High Valley.

The next days were filled with hard, unrelenting labor. They brought the wagon up and unloaded the Tucson machinery, moving it into the building inch by inch with pry bars. Mostly they ate their meals at the mill, cooking on a fire in the open, rather than take the time to go down for the greasy fare that the boom-camp offered.

Johnny grumbled about the long hours and disappeared from time to time, returning with the smell of whiskey on him.

On the third day he returned with a knowing glint in his eyes. He peered toward Gil. "You ought to get out a bit," he said. "Circulate around some, like I do. A man finds out things."

"Johnny," said Gil; "you're like an old woman when it comes to gossip."

The hardrock man shrugged. "Maybe. But I find out that Brinton runs a tight camp here. Them guards of his, particularly the ones up at the tunnel entrances, only warn a man once before they shoot. Nobody gets near them tunnels except the man that work in 'em."

Gil nodded. There was little or no law in these back corners of the Territory. A man with a rich mine had to find his own means of protecting it from the ever-present few who were willing to take big risks to steal it from him.

"All right, then," Johnny continued. "Here's somethin' else for you to chew on. Not one of them tunnel miners ever shows up in any of the saloons to jabber with the boys. Maybe Brinton don't want folks to know what's up there in that mountain, hey? Some claim that the vein's forty feet wide an' richer than Tombstone; others claim it's just a thread. Nobody knows for sure. An' here's another thing—you see a

big bucko with long arms an' bushy eyebrows, sort of slow-witted lookin', hangin' around Brinton's office all the time?"

"Yes," Gil admitted.

"That's Alf Brinton's Man Friday. Nobody knows if he's got a last name. Alf busted a man's back in a saloon a week ago."

"None of our concern, is it?" Gil asked. He was tired, and he put the question sharply.

Powder Johnny grunted and said, "Maybe not—so far. But here's one that'll hit you where you live. Ruby Sleeson's in town!"

Gil put down the wrench he had been using. He felt like he had been hit in the belly. It wasn't fear exactly; it was more a sharpening awareness of danger that might have to be faced. He said, "You sure about that?"

"Yup. Didn't see 'im myself, but the description sure fits like a glove. Dried-up little hombre, askin' all kinds of questions, mainly about you an' where you're at an' what you're doin'. Told you, didn't I, that them cowmen let us through too easy? Now, I can make a dicker with that livery corral for a couple more horses an' saddles. We could keep 'em up here where they'd be handy in case we had to—"

Gil laughed. "You're seeing dragons, Johnny."

Goren rubbed his bristly jaw and glanced toward the corner where young Lon was cleaning dried muck from a riffle table. "Got the kid to think about, ain't we?"

"Sleeson," Gil pointed out, "can't get past those guards at the fence. Even if he does—" Gil shrugged and touched the stock of his gun.

Johnny was glumly stubborn about it. "Sleeson's got that whole ranch outfit back of him, ain't he? He ain't workin' alone. Likely he was just gettin' the lay of the land when he was in camp. When he comes after us he'll have that Vance with 'im an' no tellin' how many more."

"Hold on, Johnny! You just told me that Brinton runs a tight camp."

"All right, all right! There can be a slip-up, remember, in Brinton's control of things. Sleeson's out to get you, but that ain't all that's proddin' them. There's some silk-hat fellers in camp. Money men from back East. They got some kind of a deal on with Brinton, to put more capital into the mine. If this here mill produces rich enough concentrates the deal's closed. There's talk that the last mill man here didn't put out any concentrates because he didn't want to—maybe he was bought off, hey? Vance, he's out to put a crimp in Silver Queen any way he can. What better way, now, than to nail you? You're on the hot spot an' you better—"

Gil laughed and shoved the wrench into Johnny's hands. "Talk, talk," he said. "How about a little work?"

CHAPTER 4

Bushwhack Deal

THE attack, when it came, was not at all as Johnny had predicted. It did not take place at the mill. It came without any warning whatever.

Gil and his companions had put in a solid week of work; everything in the mill was nearly in readiness for operation. They were tired, hungry, and out of grub. Shortly past sundown on Saturday, Gil suggested that they go down into the camp.

They had a meal, and they bought supplies enough to pull them through another week. They sat in the barber shop, with Johnny becoming more and more restless, while Lon's hair was cut.

Finally Johnny rose and said something about getting a drink.

When the haircut was finished Gil paid the barber and slung the heavy sack of grub over his shoulder. With the kid following him, he went into the saloon and moved along the crowded bar, scanning the faces

of the roughly dressed, rough-talking men who drank there.

A percentage girl caught his arm and smiled up to him with a provocative red mouth and said, "Buy me a drink, mister?"

He said, "Not this time, honey," and disengaged her hand. He turned and left the saloon; Johnny wasn't there.

Outside, Gil spotted another saloon on the opposite side of the street. He started across.

He was in the middle of the street when the blow struck him.

It came seemingly from nowhere. It was a smashing impact that struck him in the back and wrenched him part way around. When full awareness washed back through him like an icy wave, he was on his knees in the churned dust and the gun-flame of a second shot was stabbing toward him through the half-dark of the street.

The sound of this shot set his ears to ringing, and he knew that it had missed

him. But he heard young Lon's scream and saw the kid go down.

A fierce rage pulled Gil up to his feet then. He saw the slight, crouching, intent figure at the corner of the saloon he had just left. The man was Ruby Sleson.

Gil drew his gun and triggered a shot, quick and unthinking, and saw adobe dust spurt from the saloon's wall.

And Sleson was firing again, holding his weapon in his left hand and trying to steady its barrel across his right wrist. The man's gun arm had been injured after all, by that pole in Deep Arroyo. His shots missed.

Partly to draw Sleson's fire away from the writhing Lon Ames and partly out of self-preservation, Gil darted to the cover afforded by a pile of boxed merchandise that had been unloaded in the street.

Sleson fired two shots in rapid succession. The slugs struck the boxes, making them jump and sending dust over Gil. Sleson was belying his reputation by getting



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rattled; vexed by the fact that his deftness was all in his now-useless right hand, he had emptied his fully loaded weapon. Now the man stepped back into the darkness between the saloon and the building next to it. Gil heard the swift clicking of the ejecting rod as Sleeson hurriedly packed the empties from his gun.

Gil darted forward.

He couldn't see anything here in the narrow space between the two buildings. But he collided with Sleeson and slashed down at the man with the barrel of his gun. Sleeson made a squalling sound of pain and fear and struck back with his own weapon.

The blow glanced off Gil's shoulder. He struck again and felt the gunman's body collapse against him. Holstering his weapon he dragged Sleeson out into the scant light of the street and thrust the man's back against the saloon wall and pinned him there with driving, savagely aimed blows.

Those blows were meant to hurt the man. And they did.

A voice said, "That's enough, Clayton. Better let Alf take charge of him now."

GIL kept Sleeson pinned to the wall, but turned his head. Stacey Brinton was there, his high stiff collar white in the dimness, his thumbs hooked into the pockets of a vest that was crossed by a heavy silver chain. Behind Brinton stood the hulking Alf. Nearby, lifting the long skirt of her gown to clear the saloon's dusty porch, was Lenora Tashman. Her lips were parted, her eyes were shining.

Gil said, "I'm not through with him, Brinton. He tried to kill me. He put lead into a kid who never did him harm."

"We saw it all," Brinton said, "from the window of the hotel, where we were dining. The man will be taken across the mountains and turned over to the law, Clayton. I'll see that his prosecution is pushed. Alf, take him."

The big hombre known as Alf blinked, stirred, then lumbered forward.

The angry surge of Gil's blood slowed somewhat. Still breathing in harsh gasps from his exertion, he looked at the battered ruin of Sleeson's face. The gunman's eyes held a venomous hatred.

Alf half lifted and half dragged Sleeson from the porch. But his way was blocked then, by the crowd of boom-camp men who had come out of the saloons.

One shouted, "Get a rope, boys!" Another bawled, "Miners' meetin'! We'll show these cow raisers what happens to gunmen they send into our camp!"

The tumult quickly swelled. But Stacey Brinton's voice lifted, loud yet somehow calm, above it.

"We'll have none of that in Silver Queen, boys. This man will be dealt with by the law. Stand back and let Alf through. That's an order."

A miner with a flaming red beard planted himself in Alf's way. "An order is it, now! That's just your say-so, Brinton. Up at the diggin's your word goes, but down here in camp it don't stack up any higher than anybody else's. A miners' meetin' has the final—"

Brinton's hand made a small, seemingly negligent movement. But suddenly it held a stubby double-barreled derringer that he had taken from a vest pocket. "This," he said, his thick lips smiling, "makes a difference, doesn't it? I've got two bullets here. You'll get the first of them, McDade, if you don't step back within five seconds."

The miner gaped at the weapon. He licked his lips, staring at the stocky, boyish-seeming figure of the man who wielded power in Silver Queen. Then he stepped back.

The crowd split, its tumult dropping abruptly to a low-voiced grumbling. Alf went through, lugging the almost inert figure of Ruby Sleeson up the street.

Gil Clayton wheeled and strode to the spot where young Lon had fallen. As Gil passed Lenora Tashman, she touched his arm and said something that he did not

quite understand. But Gil did not pause.

POWDER JOHNNY had come running into the street and was picking Lon up in his arms. Gil said, "Is it bad, Johnny?" "Bad, bad! We got to find a doctor. Why'n blazes didn't you stomp that snake when you had the chance? A boot-heel in the belly—"

Gil only shook his head, looking closely at Lon. The boy's wound was in the upper arm—hardly as bad as Johnny seemed to think, unless bones had been smashed by the slug or infection set in. The kid's face was white and he was biting back his pain. Gil prodded him with a thumb, grinned and told him to buck up, and was relieved when the kid grinned gamely back.

Someone in the crowd volunteered the information that there was a doctor's office up the street. Carrying Lon, Johnny set out for it.

Gil knelt to pick up the sack of grub that he had dropped. The sack was partly wet and there was a bullet hole in it. He reflected that the canned goods likely had saved his life by stopping that first carefully aimed slug of Sleeson's.

He shouldered the sack and swung to follow Johnny but was stopped by Lenora Tashman's voice. She was close by his side. "Mr. Clayton," she said, "perhaps I'm spoiled. But I'm not accustomed to being ignored."

"Sorry," he said shortly. "I reckon I had things on my mind."

"I'll forgive you." She smiled, handing him the hat that he had lost in the fight and had forgotten until this moment.

He took the hat, saying, "Why, thanks, Miss Tashman."

"Please." She smiled up to him again. "Not Miss Tashman. Lenora. You Western men are so stiffly formal." She laughed a little, her eyes mocking his solemn demeanor. "I saw that fight. All of it. You were so—savage. You might have killed him!"

He turned the hat in his hands, looking down at it; a man needed something to take his mind from Lenora Tashman. Her gown seemed molded to the warm lines of her figure and it was cut so low that her shoulders gleamed even in this dim light. The faint yet heady scent of her perfume was in his nostrils.

He said, "I reckon I came nearer to killin' him than I thought. Sorry if it upset you."

"Don't always be sorry about things! It didn't upset me at all. I—well, I rather enjoyed it. It was—fierce, elemental."

"This is an elemental business, Miss Tash—I mean, Lenora. Getting metal out of the ground is—"

"That's it exactly!" she exclaimed. "You men dig in solid rock for a living. And when you fight one another you're violent about it. Oh, I should have been a man!"

The remark caught Gil off guard. He said vehemently, "Lenora, no!"

She laughed in a quick flash of pleasure. "Thank you! Now perhaps you'll be so gallant as to see me back to the hotel. Stacey seems to have gone to see that the prisoner is locked up properly, leaving me quite alone in the middle of this..." She waved a hand to indicate the milling throng that crowded the street.

She took Gil's arm possessively. As they moved toward the hotel she laughed once more and said, "Oh, I'm feeling bold tonight! I want to know all about how you get metal out of the ground. If I come up to your mill tomorrow, will you explain it all to me?"

"Of course," Gil said.

When they were inside the hotel lobby she turned to face him. The building was an adobe structure, roughly, hurriedly finished; the lobby was a tiny affair with a plank desk across one corner. The clerk was gone, no doubt having joined the milling crowd that was rehashing the fight in the street.

Lenora lifted her arms unhurriedly and

slipped them about Gil's neck. Startled, he put down his sack of grub. Her lips were smiling as she tilted up her head, inviting his kiss.

He drew her to him fiercely, a little dizzyed by his luck and by the cool pressure of her arms about his neck. He, a man in rough miner's clothing, was holding in his arms the most beautiful woman in Silver Queen.

When the kiss ended she drew back, smiling as she slipped from his arms. "I'm sure," she said, "that my uncle wouldn't approve of this at all. Good night, Gil."

POWDER JOHNNY maintained a glum silence while he and Gil, with young Lon between them, walked up to the mill. The kid's wound had turned out to be a deep gash in the flesh of the upper arm; the doctor had bandaged it and had put the arm in a sling.

When they reached the mill Johnny spoke up at last. "All right, it didn't turn like I figured it would. That Vance bucko, he sent Sleeson after you alone. You had some luck. But if I got Vance figured right, he ain't done with you by a long shot. What we ought to do is get out of here!"

"Scared, Johnny?"

The hardrock man snorted and then glanced meaningly toward Lon. "Happens we ain't alone in the kettle, this trip."

"I told you before, Johnny, we're safe enough up here. Sleeson is going to be turned over to the law. The rest of Vance's outfit—"

"Law, hell! I still say you ought to have used your boots on that slippery son. Likely he'll get away an' come after you again. Next time he'll make sure he gets you."

"Johnny," Gil said with a finality that ended the matter, "you're getting to be hell for borrowing trouble."

Lenora Tashman came up to the mill next day. She came alone, slim and lovely in riding habit, slapping a quirt against a polished boot.

Gil was alone in the mill at the time. Johnny had departed on some errand of his own, the nature of which he gruffly refused to reveal, and young Lon had been sent to see about wood for the boiler. Gil was tightening the drive belt of one of the riffle tables when he saw Lenora in the doorway. He straightened, rubbing his hands with a bit of waste, and said, "Oh, hello!"

"Oh, hello!" She held her chin high and her cool blue eyes watched him in mocking amusement. "Aren't you going to ask me in?"

He grinned back to her. This girl roused some of the old, devil-may-care humor that was in him. "Shouldn't be necessary. The way I hear it, you practically own this shebang already—or that uncle of yours does. But come right in, and we'll have that lesson in mining."

"Oh, let's drop the pretexts, shall we?" She came forward and stood very close to him. "It's you I'm curious about."

Gil said, "Me?" Her frank statement had caught him off guard.

"Of course. Tell me all about yourself."

He floundered mentally; Lenora's nearness was disturbing at any time. And doubly so, now that he had the memory of last night's impulsive kiss. He began, "Well, I was raised on a ranch right here in High Valley, but got into mining—"

"Oh, I don't mean that sort of thing. How about the future? What are your plans?"

Gil suddenly realized that he had none. He said, "I reckon I'll just go on till I get a job in a mine that'll last. Maybe this is the one. Then maybe I'll settle down."

"With a woman of your own?"

He shrugged. "If I'm lucky. I hadn't thought that far ahead."

She leaned toward him. "Oh, that's the way I'd like to live! For today, not caring about tomorrow. Gil, you and I are a lot alike, really"

He hardly heard her words. Her lips and her eyes held a smiling witchery. Pulse

pounded at his temples. He took her in his arms.

But at that moment Powder Johnny Goren entered the mill and coughed gruffly.

Gil and Lenora moved apart. She laughed a bit and brushed a strand of her gold-blond hair into place.

"Powder Johnny Goren, Miss Lenora," Gil said stiffly.

When the girl had gone, Johnny bent a sharp glance toward Gil. "Reachin' out of your class, ain't you?" Johnny asked.

Gil made no answer at all. Lenora Tashman had left him inwardly shaken and unsure of himself.

He didn't know whether he was in love with her or not. Certainly he was intrigued by her—any man would be. But she had set him to thinking, reaching ahead toward the future and finding nothing solid there.

A woman of his own. A home, maybe children. A man wanted those things—though Gil never had thought about it before, he knew the truth of it now. And a future like that was something a man had to build. The camps that boomed with activity and then usually died overnight when the veins pinched off provided him nothing to build upon.

He shook his head. Putting aside the insecurity of the life he had chosen, would Lenora fit into a man's plan for the future if he had one? He knew very little about her. The thought came to him that she was too beautiful to stand over a hot stove for any man; then the ridiculousness of that idea overtook him and he laughed sourly to himself.

He wasn't thinking straight at all. He forced himself to concentrate upon the work at hand but found that he was clumsy at it. The drive belt that he was trying to tighten got away from him altogether and fell to the floor.

"Better get pulled together," Powder Johnny warned. "We got to get this mill rollin'. I hear the money men are gettin'

very impatient to see some concentrates."

It was evening before Gil fully realized what underlay the tense restlessness that was in him. The future didn't matter after all. What counted was now. Hadn't Lenora said that the two of them were much alike? The thing that had been submerged in his thinking came to the top and nagged him then. He had been sure, on that first occasion when he saw her in Brinton's office, that she had just been kissed.

Something deep within him warned him that he was simply infatuated with her. But it was a strong thing—as strong as the lure that made men throw away their common sense when confronted with the possibility of mineral in the earth. Maybe she was just a flirt. Certainly she had led him on. But no matter. Lenora was in his blood. And he wondered whether he was going to fight Stacey Brinton over her.

It was two days later that the messenger came. Gil and Johnny had had some trouble with the line shaft and had driven themselves night and day to correct it. Now the mill was ready to run. With young Lon they were eating their supper outside because of the heat, perching on the railing of the mill's porch with their plates on their knees. The rider who came up the slope and dismounted was a Mexican, swarthy and pock-marked. He touched his hat with the politeness of his race and said, "Señor Gil Clayton?"

Gil said, "Yes?"

A smile flashed across the Mexican's thin face. "I am Diego Vargas, señor—one of the packers. I bring word from the Señorita Erna. She wishes to speak with you. She waits now, near the steam pump."

Gil stared, then nodded. As the Mexican remounted, Powder Johnny called, "Hey, there's guards down at the fence. How'd you get through, Vargas?"

The pock-marked face came around. "As I 'ave tell you, I am one of the packers. For the mine. I go w'ere I please. *Buenas noches.*"

When the Mexican had gone Johnny said, "I'll be damned! You had one pretty gal up here to see you the other day, an' now . . . Gil, it's a trap! That Vance, he's—"

Gil silenced him with a gesture and got to his feet. A full round moon was rising over the peaks to the east. In its light he could see the walking beam of the pump, toylike in the distance, working steadily up and down. He said, "I'm going out there. I'll risk a trap, Johnny. I want to tell that girl what I think of her man Vance for sending a back-shooter after me."

Johnny shrugged and reached for the cup of coffee that he had placed on the railing beside him. "Your funeral," he said.

CHAPTER 5

Desperate Lady

GIL got his horse from the O. K. and rode out onto the valley floor. He was not too concerned about the possibility of a trap. His hunch was that Erna Walthew would not lend herself to any such scheme of Vance's. The deep anger that was in him turned against Vance himself and not against the girl.

He was still a quarter mile from the pump when he heard a low whistle and turned toward it.

Erna Walthew was waiting on her horse. In the moonlight the range girl seemed touched by some magic. She wore shirt and levis as before, but now they were clean and her face had a scrubbed look and her short auburn hair was brushed. It went deeper than that, however; she seemed possessed of some inner radiance that made Gil stare at her.

She left the sawed-off rifle in its boot this time. She said gravely, "Thanks for coming. Let's light down and talk. Over there. We can sit on that log under the tree."

When they were seated under the live

oak, Gil built a smoke, shaping it carefully, not looking at Erna Walthew, waiting for her to have her say as she chose. He sensed that her small tanned face was tilted up and that she was looking over the tops of the trees toward the big walking beam of the pump.

The clank of machinery and the rhythmic sigh of escaping steam were the only sounds against the quiet of the night. A plume of smoke, very white in the moonlight, trailed from the top of the tall chimney.

The girl spoke at last. "You're nearly ready to start running the ore mill, aren't you?"

He nodded. "Tomorrow." He gave her a searching look. "You seem to know considerable about what goes on up there. Diego?"

"Of course. He—well, he owes some gambling debts to Brett."

"The Walking W, using a spy," Gil mused. "I reckon you know, then, what happened when your man Vance sent Sleeson after me."

"Gil, please." Erna put her hand on his arm. "That's what I had to see you about. You've just got to believe what I'm going to tell you. Tren didn't send Sleeson to Silver Queen with any orders to kill you. He didn't send him anywhere except off Walking W range. He fired him!"

Gil laughed. He was thinking of young Lon Ames, trying to work around the mill with his arm in a sling, and his anger put a bitter edge in his voice. "That's a pretty good one, girl. Are you trying to tell me that Sleeson went gunning for me just on his own hook?"

"Yes. He—he hates you, Gil." Erna paused, biting her lip. "Oh, I know how it sounds to you, but listen—please listen. I made Tren fire Sleeson. I never did like having a gunman on the crew, from the day Brett brought him into the valley and talked Tren into hiring him. When you had your run-in with him in Deep Arroyo, I'd been following him because I suspected

he was killing our calves and selling them to the miners. I think he got rough with you because he had some idea of running you off and then selling your wagon and its contents for what he could get out of it. He's that kind. I raised such a fuss about it that Tren finally fired him."

"It goes down hard, girl."

Her hand tightened on his arm. "Do believe me. I'm not lying to you. I'm not trying to get the Walking W out from under. I know you hate us Walthews for what we did to your family and I can't blame you for that, but please—"

"No," he said, "it's not that. Maybe I'm not a good hater. All that happened a long time ago and I've tried to forget it."

"Gil, I'm—grateful. Dad was wrong, of course. But he thought he was doing the right thing. He always worried about the valley being over-grazed. He'd seen what that could mean when he was a young man in Texas—he'd seen it kill the grass com-

pletely and let the wind blow the topsoil away. The trouble was, he was too rough in enforcing his ideas."

Gil crushed out his cigarette. "Maybe there was some mavericking done by the Claytons at that," he admitted. "Those brothers of mine were a pretty wild bunch and they were sore about the pushing around they thought they were getting from Walking W. It could be they got a little free with their branding irons."

She caught her breath audibly and then said, "Gil, you can have your ranch back! I—I talked to Dad about it. He's changed, Gil. Getting hurt by that bronc, and being laid up for months, has made him look at things differently. He says you can take up your folks' range again."

Gil looked at her in amazement. Her face was tilted up toward his and her brown eyes were deeply earnest. The Walthews, he thought wryly, had changed a lot. They had been imperious—now they reached out

"It's no mystery to me!"

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for friendship. First Brett, and now Erna. Perhaps distaster had made them more human.

It was odd, he thought, that he hadn't noticed before that Erna was really a pretty girl. No, pretty wasn't the word—she had a deeper and more rewarding beauty. It didn't hit a man in the face but it was there.

He started building another smoke. "The ranch wouldn't be worth shucks," he said, "without water."

"We'll get the water back, Gil!"

"How?"

She bit her lip again, as if to control its sudden tremor. She tried to speak but seemed unable to force words past her lips.

"Ease down, girl," he advised. "You're all wrought up about something. What is it?"

HE NEVER did know exactly how it happened. She leaned suddenly toward him and buried her face against his shoulder and then she was crying. He threw away his cigarette and put an arm about her and crooked a finger under her chin, tilting her head so that he could look into her tear-streaming eyes. "Erna," he asked gently, "what's the matter?"

"Oh, Gil! Gil, I . . ."

She faltered and was silent, no longer crying now. Without consciously willing it he pressed his mouth upon hers. He found her lips warm, frankly responsive. Her fingertips dug into the flesh of his upper arm and she clung to him.

Then she put her face tight against his shoulder once more. "Oh, Gil!" she said again in a small, hushed voice. "I always knew you were the man for me. You never suspected it, but I—I had a crush on you, so long ago. You never noticed me—I was pretty much the spoiled brat, wasn't I?" She laughed a little, almost hysterically. "Gil, I was g-going to throw myself at you tonight! But I just couldn't!"

He was jolted. The girl had read into that kiss a significance that he hadn't in-

tended at all. And she was talking wildly. He said, "Why would you want to do that?"

She drew a deep breath and without lifting her head she said, "Gil, we've got to have help. You work in that ore mill—couldn't you f-fix it so they don't get any silver?"

Gil's mouth tightened. "Put the mine out of business for you, is that it? It's no good. Even if I'd do it, which I won't, it wouldn't get you a drop of water in time to do any good. It might take years for that water table to come back up again."

"But we've got to do something!" she exclaimed, drawing away from him and sitting very straight on the log. "That man you have with you—he's what they call a powdermonkey, isn't he? Gil, I want to hire him. To blow up that steam pump!"

"So that's it." His voice was harsh. He got to his feet. "You fixed things so we could get through Sentinel and up to the mine because you figured you could use us."

"Gil!" She was crying again now. "You came past those dry wells of ours—I saw the tracks of your wagon. You must have seen and heard those poor cattle. Has mining taken the heart out of you, that you can stand to see what's happening here? We had to sell off another hundred head last week. We found a tiny spring up in the mountains and we've been hauling water from it, but it's drying up. We can't last much longer!"

She was almost hysterical now. Gil said gently, "Dynamite that pump and the mine will have it working again inside of a week. They've got to have that water. Lots of it."

"We've got to live! If the dynamite was placed just right, mightn't it cave in the whole well? Brett says—"

"Forget it," Gil said, interrupting her. "Brinton would just put down another well. And dynamiting would put you in bad with the law. Think straight, girl." He paused, turning quickly to look at their horses. The animals had stopped grazing and were

standing with heads up and ears pricked toward the west. Some sound over there had attracted their attention. Perhaps it had been made by a prowling coyote, perhaps not.

He turned back to Erna Walthew. "Get on your horse," he said. "I'll ride with you to the *casa*."

"Why?" she asked sharply.

He shook his head. "Not to pick any row with your father. I'll not even go in. But I aim to see that you get there safely."

"It isn't necessary," she protested as she swung into her saddle.

He nodded toward the lights of Silver Queen, gleaming now from the mountain-side. "Those men up there are miners. To them any woman alone is fair game."

Her small tanned face suddenly was tight and her manner was withdrawn, distant. "I see. You'd do the same for any woman, wouldn't you? Well, I can take care of myself." She touched the stock of the sawed-off rifle. "I've been here alone dozens of times to hear what Diego had to tell me. I'll ride home alone. Good night, Mr. Clayton."

He touched his hat. "Have it your way, then."

She reined away and then paused, not looking back toward him. "I guess I made a fool of myself after all. Please forget—everything that I said. And thanks for—not being a miner."

She rode away at a gallop.

GIL mounted slowly, thinking that the feeling of tightness in his throat was pity. A Clayton was feeling sorry for the Walthews. Time had a way of twisting things around . . .

He had ridden but a short distance toward Silver Queen when Powder Johnny Goren, mounted on a livery horse and thrusting his gun under his belt, came out of the shadows and ranged alongside. Johnny's battered face held a small smile of apology. "Just makin' sure it was no trap."

Gil said, "You're getting to be a damned old snoop."

Johnny was unruffled. "Snoopin' wasn't my aim an' you well know it. Happens I did find out somethin' on the way, though. Sleeson's still in camp."

"They haven't sent him out over the mountain yet, then."

"Not what I mean. He's loose, slinkin' around where he pleases, doin' some drinkin' an' a lot of ponderin'. No talk. His face is all bandaged up an' he don't show himself more'n he has to. Me, I don't like the smell of it. The boys say—"

"I'll see Brinton about that," Gil promised.

But he was busy the next day. They made the first run of the mill late in the afternoon. Stacey Brinton had left them strictly alone all during the lengthy process of setting up; there was a tradition in the mining game that mill men were to perform their magic in solitude, and Brinton seemed aware of that.

At any rate Gil was grateful for the free hand that had been given him. No two veins of ore ever milled the same. There always were kinks to be ironed out, changes to be made to accommodate the quirks of the pay rock. Gil worked hard, yet he was edgy and preoccupied. He had too much on his mind.

It wasn't the thought of Ruby Sleeson, nor of the gunman's unexplained freedom in the camp, that bothered Gil now. It was Erna Walthew.

He had hurt her plenty, and it lay heavily upon his conscience. Her ideas about the mill and about using powder on the well had of course been foolish and impractical, and thus a measure of her desperation. But she had taken that kiss seriously and then she had been crushed by his refusal to help her.

Range people, he reflected, were different from the kind he had known during the past few years. Neither better nor worse, perhaps, but certainly different.

He had been harsh with Erna, partly because he hadn't stopped to think—Lenora Tashman had been on his mind—and partly because of his anger over that back-shooting attack of Sleeson's. He wished now that he could undo the whole thing.

He went out onto the little porch of the mill and looked across the valley floor, first toward the pump and then farther down the valley to the distant white spot that marked the Walthew *casa*.

Perhaps it was the harsh justice of time that the Walking W be destroyed and that Gil Clayton should have a part in its downfall. But the thought made him shake his head.

Powder Johnny came out and stood at his side. Over the rumble of the mill machinery Johnny remarked, "I found out another thing in town last night. That Diego, he's makin' himself a good thing out of sellin' beef to the provisioners. Walkin' W beef."

Gil shrugged, thinking wryly that it served Erna right for employing a spy. If a man would sell out to one side, he would sell out to the other if it profited him.

He turned and went back into the mill to peer at the riffle tables.

Something was wrong. The concentrates, which at first had come off the ends of the riffles in dark streams to fall into the end troughs and then into the vats where they would settle out, had thinned to almost nothing.

Johnny grunted and shut off the machinery and plunged a hand into the muck sluice. He peered closely at the material he found there.

"We ain't losin' it," he said. He opened the ore hopper and took out a few pieces of quartz, swore, and handed them wordlessly to Gil. He went outside and climbed up the bunker and returned with more samples. "Barren rock!" he snorted. "Do those guys up there in the tunnels call themselves miners? Hell, they don't know ore from—"

Gil took the bunker samples from John-

ny's hand. They held only faint traces of mineral—nothing like the high-grade they had found in the hopper at first.

"I'll see Brinton about this," Gil said.

Johnny spat. "A swindle, you think? Maybe he's minin' stockholders, hey? That first bonanza stuff come from a pocket that didn't carry down, an' he's tryin' to keep the mine lookin' good till he gets his hooks on that Eastern money."

"You're jumping to conclusions," Gil said. Then he added grimly, "But it could be."

As he went down the slope toward Brinton's office, he recalled that he had seen promotion schemes before. Honest hard-rock men detested them. But there was always the smooth promoter who got hold of a promising mine, organized companies and went to work, spending the stockholders' money like water. If the mine struck rich ore, well and good. If not, the equipment and the activity made a good showing to impress inexperienced eyes, and brought in more investment money. At the proper time the promoter moved out with a fortune in his pockets.

It had been said that there was more money in the eager investors' back East than in all the mines in Arizona.

Gil passed the rifle-carrying guards at the gate and then stalked into Brinton's office.

A clerk with an eyeshade and black sleeve-guards looked up inquiringly. Gil said, "I'm Clayton, from the mill. You keep daily assay sheets here?"

"Yes, sir, we do."

"I want to see the latest ones."

The clerk handed him a clip-board which carried a dozen-odd reports of the sort that were customary in operating mines, covering assays taken across the portion of the vein removed in each day's work. Gil riffled through them. Silver, 188 ounces per ton. 104.5 ounces. 464 ounces. 211 ounces. Well-faked assays, with sufficient irregularity to make a convincing show of the natural spot-

tiness of any vein. But Gil wasn't fooled.

He handed back the clip-board. "Who does your assaying?"

"Mr. Brinton, sir."

"Does he, now. I'll see him!"

The clerk moved hastily toward the door of the inner office. "I'll tell him you're—"

"No," Gil said, pushing through the gate in the railing and shoving the clerk aside. "I'll see him right now." He strode into the office of Stacey Brinton.

CHAPTER 6

Too Late to Change

THE Silver Queen manager was seated at the big window that overlooked the valley, peering through a brass telescope which was mounted on a tripod. He turned, frowning at the intrusion.

"Brinton," Gil said flatly, "you're a damn poor assayer. Either that or you're an out-and-out crook."

The man's thick lips made a careful smile. "I'll overlook your rash statements, Clayton, but you'd better cool down." He swung his chair around and put well-tailored elbows on the desk. "You're all worked up about the ore. The point is, are you getting any values out of it at all?"

"Mighty little. What you had salted in the hopper was rich stuff. The bunker ore won't pay out. Why keep on mining it?"

Brinton toyed with a pencil. "The hopper wasn't salted. That ore was from our first strike on the vein. It turned out to be only a pocket."

"Yet you're going ahead in a big way. To impress the money men, maybe? Mister, that makes it a swindle."

Brinton smiled again. "We'll not use that word here. You know the mining game, Clayton—always a gamble, for all of us. Make up what bricks you can of the concentrate from that first ore, so we can give one or two of them to the Tashman group.

They'll want to have independent assays made on the concentrate. Then get every bit of it that you can out of the bunker ore and press out bricks with the concentrate on the outside and lead inside to give them weight. And don't worry about your job here coming to an end. This is just a stepping-stone to something better and much more permanent."

Gil stared at the man. "You think I'd let myself get pulled in on something like that? What happens to my reputation as a mill man when those fake bricks hit the smelter?" Gil laughed suddenly; his feeling was one of vast relief. "Hell, this is funny! I was going to ask you to make some sort of arrangement to supply water to the cattle outfits down the valley, but now I see that it won't be necessary. Silver Queen will be down and deserted inside of a month. Or a week!"

Brinton's face hardened; the boyish look was gone from it entirely. He said, "Let's understand each other, Clayton. I let you work along and get the feel of things here because I don't believe in throwing a deal like this at a man all at once. But I'm not in the habit of hiring men with my eyes shut. I know your background. You were born in this valley. Your family was run out by the Walthews. I'm giving you your big chance to get back at them."

"I'm listening," Gil said coldly. "Where do the Walthews come into this swindle of yours?"

"I told you that we'll not use that word here. Risk capital has to take its chances. The Tashman group is gambling on a mine. It's like betting on the turn of a card, isn't it? If the card turns out to be the trey instead of the ace, that's that. But I've found something here in this valley that I want. An easy, graceful life. No more mining towns, no more eating of greasy slum, no more of having to control a bunch of drunken, brawling miners. And no more moving on to another camp and then on to still another. I've just been looking at the

Walthew ranch house through the 'scope here. Comfortable place, isn't it? A man with the working capital to develop the valley properly could run thousands of cattle and live like a feudal prince."

Gil said, "I reckon I'm not hearing you right. That ranch is worthless. You made it so by taking the water away from it."

Brinton smiled once more. "Exactly. It is worthless—now."

GIL'S brows lifted. Comprehension came to him slowly at first, and then with a rush. "So that's it," he said. "You get the ranch for next to nothing. Then with the mine shut down you've got the well."

"Clayton, you're an alert young man. You catch on to things. You're the man I want—you can run that ranch for me. When we close this deal with the Tashman group, which will be as soon as you come up with a showing of concentrates, I'll go down into Mexico for a time. While I'm away you can get the ranch shaped up as suits your judgment—I believe in giving a man a free hand. When I return you'll continue on as manager, of course."

"The Walthews won't sell to you, mister. And I'd make a hell of a poor manager, workin' from the inside of some jail!"

"You're not to worry about prison at all. Those loaded concentrates will never reach the smelter. I'll make sure of that. You'll be in the clear. The Tashman interests will have a mine, with nothing of value in it; after a time they'll give it up. The ranch will be held by a dummy corporation so that it can't be taken from me by investors' suits."

Gil shook his head. He said again, "The Walthews won't sell."

"They'll sell. Diego Vargas tells me that they're planning to dynamite the steam pump. I'm waiting for that. I have the right to protect Silver Queen property by any means that may be necessary, and the law will back me up. The Walthews will sell then, rather than face prosecution."

Gil tried to think. "You're wrong on one thing, mister. I've got no particular hate for the Walthews. I want no part in your steal."

Brinton's head reared. He seemed shocked. He glared as if he had discovered some grievous flaw in the younger man's makeup.

Then he dipped a hand into the pocket of his vest; it came out gripping the derringer. "You'll have to learn, Clayton, to stop making rash statements. It happens I've a great deal at stake here and I can't afford to give you any choice. Alf is just outside. And there's another man in town who hates you. Sleeson. I kept him around with the thought that he might be useful in a pinch. It seems that I was right."

Gil barely restrained the rise of his wrath. He wanted to risk the derringer, leap over the desk and batter that thick-lipped face. But that would bring others. And Gil wanted first to get Johnny and young Lon out of this, then to keep Erna Walthew from carrying out her foolish notion of dynamiting the steam pump.

He said carefully, "What about the pay on that ranch managing job, mister?"

Brinton, Gil thought then, was fooled. The Silver Queen manager relaxed, though he did not put the derringer away. "Whatever the going rate happens to be," he said, "plus a monthly bonus."

Gil nodded. "I'll need some time to think about it. Give me twenty minutes."

"Twenty minutes."

"I'll be back," Gil said, turning to leave the office. He wondered if his face revealed that he did not intend to come back at all.

WHEN he closed the outside door he was trembling. Part of it was fear, of course—Brinton had strength here and would not hesitate to use it. But mostly it was anger.

In his preoccupation he almost collided with Lenora Tashman on the office porch. She looked up at him with laughing eyes

and twirled her sun parasol. "My, we're grim and in a hurry today. You've found out about the ore?"

He was startled. "You know about that?"

"Of course. Stacey boasts to me—I'm going to marry him, you know."

"How about the way he's doing your uncle?"

She lifted a shoulder. Then she swayed toward Gil slightly. "You're going to work for us, aren't you? On the ranch, I mean?"

"Don't bet on it."

Her lips, unnaturally red in the sunset light, pouted provocatively. Her hand touched his arm. "Gil, we could be—good friends. If it's that money deal you're thinking about, forget it. How do you think Uncle Dan got it in the first place, if not by sharp dealing? Now he's met someone sharper than he is, and I find it amusing."

Distaste welled up within him. There had been a time when Lenora Tashman had

set him to building nebulous dreams of the future, but that time was past.

He pushed past her. "I don't give a hoot about your uncle's money."

"Gil," she cried angrily, "don't be a fool!"

He kept going, heading up the slope.

Powder Johnny was waiting impatiently at the mill. "Well?" he demanded.

"A swindle," Gil said. "Go find Lon. We're getting out. I bought us twenty minutes of time by letting on I was interested in the proposition he offered me."

"Twenty minutes, hell," Johnny said. "Look!"

Gil wheeled and saw that the two armed guards had left the fence and were coming upward, their rifles in their hands.

Brinton hadn't been fooled at all.

POWDER JOHNNY was swearing. "He can't afford to have us blabbin' what we know. Now, it happens I brought horses



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up here last night. Yours, an' a couple others from the livery stable."

It was the horses that saved them. Without taking time to gather their meager gear they hustled the white-faced young Lon out of the mill and raced down to the horses.

With a mining man's lack of horse savvy, Johnny had left the animals saddled, with cinches tight, when he staked them out. That saved time now. In a moment they were riding.

For a time the mill concealed them from the guards who had come up from below. Then there were shouts, and the cracking sounds of the rifles, and the whine of bullets in the gathering dusk.

They urged their mounts forward, trying to get beyond rifle range. They rounded a bulge of the mountain slope and then they were in the clear.

They made a crude camp high in the mountains that night. In the morning Gil saw that they were almost at the top of the range. Young Lon went looking for water.

"We find a way down the other side," Johnny said, "an' hit for Tucson, hey? Might be we'll get wind of jobs there."

Gil was looking out over the expanse of High Valley. He felt the pull of it. He had a name for it now; it was home. He thought about Erna Walthew and knew that her nearness had stirred him more than he had realized at the time. It was no heady and unsure feeling, but the calm and steady pull of something that was right.

He was in love with Erna Walthew.

He said, "I'm going back into the valley, Johnny."

The hardrock man snorted. "That skirt, hey? Don't be a fool."

"No. Brinton's topping off his swindle by taking her ranch."

"None of your worry. Let 'em tear each other to pieces."

"No. She's in a corner and she's going to make a fool move that'll put her right where Brinton wants her. You take Lon to Tucson. I'll see you there in a week."

Johnny grunted. "Damn it for a useless thing, arguin' with a man that's got his head full of skirt. Well, I never did have sense. I'll go along an' pick up what's left of you when that Sleson gets through."

They made a wide circle to clear the mining town and moved down the east side of the valley, reaching Sentinel just at sundown. They watered their mounts at the town trough, then had a meal at the restaurant. Win Cully, the whiskered little cook, supplied information in response to Gil's prompting.

"No, Vance ain't been in town today. Plenty of other Walkin' W hombres was in an' out, though. Ol' Angus, at the store, says they cleaned him out of sixgun shells. This afternoon the whole caboodle of them cowboys rode through an' headed towards the mine. Looks like war to me. I'm goin' to go home an' lock my doors tonight."

Johnny and Gil rented a stall in the livery barn for Lon's horse, and in spite of the boy's protests they left him there with orders to bed down in the haymow. Then, together, they rode up the valley.

The Walking W had chosen its time well. The night was moonless so far; until hours from now there would be only the stars for light. Gil and Johnny located the pump by the dark spire of its chimney and rode toward it with increasing caution.

A man's voice uttered an oath somewhere in the dark. There was a flurry of the hoofbeats of suddenly spurred horses. And then men were all around them, starlight glinting on drawn guns.

A bass voice rumbled, "Clayton! What're you doin' here?"

"Aiming to keep you from making a fool of yourself, Vance. Brinton knows you're going after the pump. You're riding into a trap."

"Are we?" Vance inquired acidly. Reaching, he pulled Gil's gun from holster and dropped it to the ground. Two other riders pinned Powder Johnny's horse between theirs and disarmed the hardrock man in



They urged their mounts forward, trying to get out of rifle range.

spite of his angry growl. Vance settled back in his saddle, saying, "Now then, you sneakin' spies! Brinton sent you to stall us?"

Gil snapped, "He doesn't need to stall. He's ready for you. Old man, you'll be wiped out."

Vance grunted and twisted in the saddle. "Brett, how's this hombre's talk sound to you?"

"I—don't know." Brett Walthew's voice wavered. "Maybe—"

Vance snorted. "This outfit wasn't built on maybes! We've got dynamite an' we'll use it. Clayton, I warned you once—"

Vance lifted his arm and chopped abruptly down with the heavy barrel of his gun.

The blow was quick—Gil had no chance to evade it. The jolt of it ran down his spine and he toppled into a complete and silent blackness.

CHAPTER 7

Blow-Up

WHEN he stirred again his head was crammed with throbbing misery. There was a roaring in his ears, punctuated with sharper crashes that were almost unbearable.

He raised up. Powder Johnny's voice said, "About time, bucko. When I seen that old hellion gunwhip you I tried to get

to you but another of 'em bent a gunbarrel over my head. I got a hard skull, an' come out of it before you did. Found our guns in the grass here. We get out of this now, hey?"

Gil got to his knees and looked around. The crashing sounds that he had heard were gunfire. The fight at the well was on.

A dozen fires gleamed redly in a circle around the steam pump. Piles of brush had been arranged there and soaked with kerosene, probably, beforehand. When the attack came, they had been touched off to throw their glare in the faces of Vance's men and light them for the guards, who were fortified up behind the stone foundations of the pump and the boiler.

Vance's first rush had been stopped cold. The Walking W men were dismounted and several were down, unmoving. The others had found scant cover and were firing ineffectually toward the pump. Brett Walthew, lighted by the fires, was the only man who stood erect. He stood behind a hummock, his left arm dangling, and yelled as he fired.

But his bullets, like those of the others, only ricocheted from the rock foundations. And the pump's guards had rifles; they were taking their time, picking off the Walking W men one at a time.

Gil rose, taking his gun from Johnny's hand, and moved forward.

When he came within range he knelt to take careful aim and then hammered out five shots in rapid succession. He fired not at the guards but at the boiler above and behind them. Powder Johnny caught the idea and kept up the fire while Gil reloaded.

Gil began firing again. The .44 slugs that clanged against the steel shell of the boiler carried a wallop. If only one of them could find a weak spot and get through. . . .

The rifles located Gil and Johnny then. A bullet struck the ground in front of them and threw dirt in their faces. Another tugged sharply at Gil's cheek. For a moment he thought the whole side of his face had

been torn away but when he put his fingertips to it he found a deep gash, welling blood.

They threw themselves flat on the ground but continued their fire. Even Tren Vance saw the point now, or thought he did. His deep voice boomed an order for his men to fire at the boiler.

The metal shell, weakened by the battering it received, opened a seam. There was a screech of sound; then a sudden white cloud enveloped those who were fortified behind the foundations. A man screamed. The rifle fire ceased as the guards scrambled back and away from the scalding steam.

Vance shouted, "That does it, boys! Fetch up that powder!"

Gil got in front of the Walking W ramrod. Vance gaped at him, half raising his gun. "You! What's it take to—"

"Old man," Gil said, "you keep on being a fool and it'll kill you. How are you going to get through that steam? If you wait till it's gone the guards will be on you again—with everybody in Silver Queen down here to back them. You've got wounded men. Get them out of here while there's time for it."

Vance rubbed his leathery jaw and peered at Gil with a mixture of expressions clashing on his face. "Why, damn you," he said. "Where in blazes do you stand? You got guts. And if you hadn't busted that boiler—" He turned suddenly and bawled an order. "Get the horses, boys. Help the hombres that's hurt."

Several of the cowmen were beyond help. Vance went to them one by one and peered down at them with a strained thinning of his face. The wounded men were lifted onto horses. Brett Walthew, after thrusting his bleeding left arm inside his shirt, mounted without help—he seemed pleased by the discovery of an unsuspected manhood within himself.

Gil looked keenly around and said to Vance, "Where's Miss Erna?"

"Why . . . I dunno!" Vance exclaimed.

"I figured she'd be here. Until a minute ago I figured she was the only Walthew with any sand left. But it's just as well she didn't see this. We got to move out." He jabbed a forefinger to Gil's chest. "You, mister, ride with us. Want to talk to you."

Gil wheeled away, and with Powder Johnny, sought out their mounts. A deep alarm had laid hold of him now. It wasn't like Erna to miss out on the attack that she and Brett had planned. Unless something had happened to keep her from getting here. . . .

Mounted up, he rode swiftly, quartering away from the main group and putting off till another time his talk with Tren Vance. The Walking W men were heading for Sentinel, no doubt taking the wounded to the doctor there.

The fight at the well had been indecisive. Certainly Brinton had planned for it to have a different ending. But wouldn't the promoter have been on the scene to make certain that the thing went his way? Unless he had more important business elsewhere. . . .

The thing that was building in Gil's mind filled him with dread. He lifted his horse to a gallop and swung toward the distant Walking W *casa*, trying to find and follow the bee line that anyone riding from the house to the well would take.

Then he heard the scream. It was a woman's scream, faint with distance and yet clear against the silence of the range. A scream more of helpless fury than of fear.

He threw a taut look toward Powder Johnny then, and whipped his horse with the rein-ends.

THEY were in a little arroyo. Erna Walthew, her arms pinned behind her slim back by Alf, and Stacey Brinton, hatless but resplendent in riding breeches and boots that gleamed in the light cast by the moon that now was rising over the peaks to the east.

The angry clash of their voices had

guided Gil and Johnny in. The hardrock men had dismounted at a distance to move silently to the arroyo's edge.

Brinton was saying, "You may as well face the facts, Miss Walthew. It's all over at the well. I was within my rights in protecting the mine's property, but this thing was a serious mistake on your part. Your father, as head of the Walking W, will go to prison for it."

Erna's struggles stopped. Her face seemed suddenly drained of all feeling. "He can't! He's been hurt—it would kill him!"

"Probably." Brinton gave her his thick-lipped, lazy smile. "See that he accepts my offer for the Walking W and I'll not press charges."

Gil strode down into the arroyo then. "Brinton," he called, "you're on mighty thin ice when you talk about prison."

Brinton jerked around. His forehead seemed to bulge with the rise of his wrath. He moved to one side as if to avoid Gil's approach.

Gil warned, "Leave that derringer of yours strictly alone, mister. Tell your man Alf to turn loose of Miss Erna."

Brinton said, "You've got a gun on me, Clayton." And he smiled.

Gil was warned by that smile. But Erna's sudden scream carried a sharper warning. "Gil, look out! The bend of the arroyo—their horses are around that bend and there's another man with them. I think it's Ruby Sleeson!"

Gil swung, and then saw Sleeson's bandaged face at the bend of the arroyo. Sleeson was coming into the open with a catlike stride and as he moved he swung down his gun in a deft, sure little arc and triggered it. Gil dropped to the ground, knowing that he was far too slow. Sleeson was using his right hand again; and Gil could only die here, hoping to get in one shot that might tally the gunman.

He felt the impact as lead struck his body. Then he was sprawled on the ground, his own gun jerking as he fired and missed.

Sleeson's weapon spoke again. Gil heard Powder Johnny's groan behind him and felt Johnny fall across his legs.

He was alone in this now. He pulled the hammer of the .44, needing all of his strength for that simple act, and thought bitterly that he had been trapped into selling his life cheaply. Sleeson was only the hired man, or perhaps he was working for nothing. Brinton was the real evil in High Valley, and Brinton was standing safely aside.

Sleeson was closing in, coming to surething range, plainly confident that Gil was too far gone to lift his gun again.

Maybe the man was right about that. Gil's wound was draining his strength, making the smallest act require a tremendous effort. He put all of his will into his hands, and lifted the gun, and fired.

With a look of shocked unbelief in his eyes, Sleeson went down.

Erna screamed once more. Alf had released her, throwing her to the ground in his lumbering haste to get out a gun. And Brinton, thick lips parted in a snarl, was taking careful aim with the derringer.

TWO of them. Gil chose Brinton, and heard the bark of the derringer as he swung the .44 toward the promoter. Brinton had missed, and was fussing with the derringer's double trigger to get off another shot when Gil's gun spoke. Brinton swayed there with death in his eyes and then collapsed.

Gil pulled his head around to look for Alf. He tried to remember how many shots he had fired, how many shells remained in his gun, and failed. Everything seemed to be slowing down. His vision was narrowing. He located Alf and saw that the man, by some miracle, was down and twisting in agony.

Erna Walthew was running toward Gil. He called her name and tried to crawl to meet her. There was something he must tell her before it was too late. . . .

Then the darkness closed in.

He lay on a cot, in the patio of the Walking W *casa*. There was sunshine here, and flowers that were withered by lack of water but were fragrant still. He roused up and tried to focus his mind on what had happened. He found his body stiff, sheathed from the waist up with bandages under his shirt.

A voice said, "You take a lot of killin'."

He started and looked around. Powder Johnny Goren sat on a stool nearby, his head bandaged at a rakish angle and a grin on his broad and battered-looking face. Gil asked, "How long, Johnny?"

"A week. You was out of your head for a spell there. Me, I bounced back quick after that slug parted my hair an' knocked me flat. Told you I had a hard skull, didn't I? You see what happened to that Alf? Tren Vance shot him, from the edge of the arroyo. Vance got there because that Lon kid waited till the livery man went home an' then got on his horse an' headed out to help us. Lon heard the scream, same as we did. Vance an' his bunch hadn't heard it because they was talkin' back an' forth too much, but Lon seen them an' pestered Vance till he agreed to take a look-see. Then they heard the shootin' an' came a-peltin'. That kid, he'll do to keep around. The little skirt, now" Johnny's voice trailed off. He scratched an ear vigorously.

Gil said, "Johnny, is she—"

"Sure, sure, she's all right. They roped her from her horse when she rode through that arroyo but she come up fightin'. She'll be here with your grub in a minute now. My guess is she'll be glad to see you takin' notice of things again. While you're at it you might notice that she's one skirt—lady—that's got spunk."

They talked a bit more. Johnny said that Silver Queen was down, closed by the stockholders when they found they had a worthless mine on their hands. "There was a string of wagons a mile long goin' down the valley today, carryin' the people an' their gear out. A sad thing, but we've

seen it happen before, hey? Me, I'm fixin' up that boiler we busted. With Lon helpin' me. Ol' man Walthew bought the well an' aims to run water down the valley for all the ranches to use. Tren Vance, he wants to see you an' apologize for bein' so bull-headed wrong on most everything, as he puts it. 'Hell, I'm tirin' you with my fool jabber, an' you'll want to be spry when Miss Erna comes. I'll drift, partner, for now."

Gil rested, his mind holding fondly to the thought of Erna Walthew's loveliness. And then suddenly she was there beside him with a tray of food, looking anxiously down at him. He reached an arm around her slim waist.

Startled, she said, "Well, it's about time!"

"About time I woke up, or time I started making love to you?"

She blushed and laughed a little. Putting down the tray she said, "You're entirely too frisky for a man who's been out of his head for days."

He roused up on his elbows. "I'm not out of my head now, girl."

"Then—then I suppose you'll be making plans for leaving the valley," she said in a hushed voice. "You'll look for another mining job?"

"No. I've been footloose and a fool, but that part of it is over. I aim to stay in this valley where I belong."

She seemed pleased by that. And confused, as by some inner rush of feeling barely-controlled. She said hastily, "I—I hear Dad's wheelchair. He's coming to talk with you. He knows that we need you to—to straighten out the valley and keep us from doing any more crazy things like trying to blow up that well. Gil, I—"

He captured one of her hands. "I aim to put down roots here. And I'm building my plans around you. I'm in love with you and from now on I'm courting—"

She looked down at him, her lips suddenly atremble with feeling and her eyes filled

with a willing happiness. She bent quickly to touch her lips to his and she said, "Welcome home, Gil Clayton."

THE END



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HE'S HELL ON COW-THIEVES!

Box Burnet turn sickly white.
"It's Ollie Kemp," he said.



By **MARVIN DE VRIES**

The kid was man enough to catch a rustler for breakfast—but was he man enough to save that cow-thief from dancing the dead man's jig?

BOX BURNET crouched on the high ledge like a hungry panther ready to pounce on anything that showed itself below. He was J R Connected's newest and youngest rider, and he was bound and determined to make a name for himself. Jase Runniman, the boss, claimed he

wanted rustlers for breakfast, and Box meant to get him a platterful if any showed up.

"For Pete's sake, cool off," Charlie Phibbs told him crankily. "Unloosen, boy, before you jump over the edge." Charlie was old and stiff, and he tried to protect himself from the damp with a slicker. He lay flat on the cliff, a rifle nosing over the edge in front of him.

Tip Adondo, the third man, paid no attention to the proceedings whatever. His back was turned, his head wrapped in his arms, and if he wasn't asleep, he was trying his best to get there. Box didn't like him, but he tried to keep it hidden, thinking he owed it to all J R Connected riders to like them. "Here they come," Box breathed, suddenly.

"Where?" Charlie's head came up.

"Over there through Finnegan's Gap."

Charlie relaxed and let his head sag again. "That's a far piece, boy." His jaws started to work on a chew, as if, perhaps, he could squeeze a little patience out of it. "Let me tell you somethin', Box. Rustlers're like mosquitos—you start thinkin' on 'em an' you start to itch all over."

"There were five of 'em," Box breathed. "I seen 'em come through one by one."

Tip Adondo reared up and cussed. "Balls of fire," he muttered, sourly. "Can't you leave a man be?" He had been badly beaten up in a fight in town less than a week ago, and every time he moved some sensitive part of his body shrieked. Humiliation, too, added to his woes. "You can't even see Finnegan's Gap. Now shut up."

For a while, Box kept still. Tip Adondo might be right. It was dirty work, and a reasonable man would say it was too dark to see anything and let it go at that. *I know I get notions and conceits an' try to make 'em come true*, Box thought.

On the other hand, perhaps he could see. The clouds were beginning to break up. The ghostly shimmer of a timid moon was touching some far places, and cloud

shadows raced across Peppermint Valley down below. These might be Box's busy rustlers, but he wasn't so sure. He knew he could see the dip where Finnegan's Gap took a man to Outlaw Flat where his own folks and other rebels from the Ozark hills had settled along Crimson Creek. He could see the tree where outlaw bones still lay unburied in a heap on the ground as a lesson to all, and that lone tree was further than Finnegan's Gap.

"If anybody made off with that stock right out from under our noses," he began, but let the rest of it go in deference to Tip and Charlie.

"'Tain't fitten for a man my age to be out here in the dead of a wet night like this," Charlie complained. "I got a little rheumatiz, you know."

"A little, for Pete's sake," Tip jeered.

"A little, I said," Charlie repeated. "Anyway, I ain't talkin' to you. Dry up."

Tip got a sudden twinge of his own and let out a howl. "Damn that Ollie Kemp. He like to've killed me."

"Served you right," Charlie stated with scant sympathy.

"What'd I do?" Tip said aggrievedly.

"I hear you mistreated his sister, Rosalie, that's what you did."

"I never."

"At any rate, you bragged you did. If I'd been Ollie, I would've killed you outright."

BOX was glad it was dark so they couldn't see how this idle talk hit him. He wasn't more than three years out of grammar school, and in those days he used to take Rosalie up on his horse with him and give her a ride when it was muddy. And most times when it wasn't. In return, she helped him with his three R's, readin', 'ritin', and 'rithmetic, all of them very difficult matters for him.

They had been very close, and lately he had gotten a feeling toward her that sometimes scared his thoughts clear out of

him. He wouldn't give it a name, although he knew he would sometime have to face it for what it was. He hadn't seen her so much recently, just happenstance times, and he didn't seek her out, because he had a notion that anyone as pretty as she was would have the pick of the lot. But he was glad Ollie Kemp had given Tip Adondo a beating. If Tip made a slighting remark now, he might get another, even if Box thought he owed him friendship because they were on the same crew.

Tip however didn't care to talk about it, and Charlie Phibbs had had his say. Groaning again, he put his hand on his painful hip. "Aches an' pains. That's all a man gits."

"You should've told the boss," Box said, sympathetically.

Charlie laughed grimly. "Tellin' the boss about yore aches an' pains won't get you nothin' except yore walkin' papers. If a man had any sense he'd quit punchin' cows before he got started. You, for instance."

"Me!" Box pointed at himself, his jaw dropping at this wild treason. "It's all I ever wanted, Charlie, ridin' an' ropin' an' perambulin' around."

"Ridin' an' ropin' an' rheumatiz, you mean," Charlie sputtered. "The three R's of cow punchin', just like the three R's you get in grammar school. You can't get away from 'em, son."

"I got shed of mine," Box stated.

Charlie shook his head. "There's boogers in everything, Box. You'll see. I think a man's got to find the ones he kin most abide an' try to live with 'em."

All at once, Box Burnet saw rustlers again, and this time they were real for sure. They came in a crowd, hugging the shadows of the rimrock until they pulled up almost directly below. Box could hear them, too; the low rumble of voices, the small careless clink of metal, the chuffer of a horse sensing danger.

Charlie's rifle nosed straight down. Box Burnet drew his hand weapon and edged

forward. Tip Adondo came forward on all fours. "We'll run off every steer in this valley," a man below vowed, and then Charlie fired a shot.

He gave no warning of any kind. He simply took a bead and fired, and one of the riders toppled off his horse with a hard thud and lay still.

The rest scattered, heading any which way. Several poured back lead, but the main idea was to clear out and get away with their lives. Tip Adondo, leaning too far out, got his hat taken off his head and thought he was shot. He ducked so fast, all his aches and pains shrieked at once and brought him up in a moaning heap against the ledge behind them. One of the rustlers rode a white-stockinged horse that was hard to control. Box picked him out for his lead. He fired several shots and thought he missed them all, but before the rider got out of range he fell to the ground, and the horse bolted. The other three got away, making a wild thunder back to Finnegans Gap.

When the J R men got down to the valley floor, Charlie peered at the still form of a rustler. "Deader'n a doornail," he crowed. "Call me Dead-eye Dick."

Box stooped down. "That's Ez Cormack from Outlaw Flat," he said with a trace of dismay in his voice. "I knowed him well."

"So do I, the old reprobate," Charlie answered. "I've told him more'n once we'd git him some day."

The grass was high, and they had some trouble finding the other night rider. Box finally located him lying face down, his head pillowed on his arm. He didn't move.

Box turned sickly white. "It's Ollie Kemp," he called out. He sounded suddenly winded.

"Well, I do declare," Charlie answered. "I wouldn't've thought it."

"Me, either." Box's voice still sounded shaky. "He's got a heartbeat."

Tip Adondo walked over and took a good look, then straightened again and

gave Ollie Kemp a hard kick in the ribs. "The big buzzard," he snarled. Then all the vicious anger he had been nursing ever since his licking boiled over, and he rammed his gun down at Ollie Kemp's back, meaning to finish what Box had begun. Box reached out with both hands and gave him a hard shove that sent him sprawling.

Tip jumped up and struck out with his gun. The sight slashed Box across the chest, cutting his shirt and skin. Charlie let out a roar and got between them, but Tip shouldered him out of the way and took another swing at Box. Box dodged the slashing blow and hit out at Tip. Tip's head whipped back, and a gagging sound came out of his throat. He lurched to one side, almost fell, and fired a wild shot that hit the ledge behind them and screeched away into the night. Box took after him and hit him again, a hard plunging blow that caught him in the stomach and another that broke off a tooth. Tip wilted in his tracks. Box grabbed his sore fist and held it tight, his face twisting with pain.

"Whooo!" he breathed. "What's he tryin' to do, anyway?"

"He's a mean one, Box," Charlie muttered. "Next time you tangle with him, do it with a gun."

Ollie Kemp moved, and tried to roll over, but Box grabbed his gun and held him down. "It looks like I didn't any more'n singe him," he remarked hopefully. "He's got a bald streak through his hair."

Ollie Kemp opened his eyes, and Box let him roll over. "It's me, Box Burnet, Ollie. Now take it easy. You're caught."

"My head!" Ollie groaned.

"I reckon I streaked your skull," Box told him. "What are you messin' with this kind of business for, shamin' all your kin?"

"A man don't expect things to go wrong," Ollie said. He was several years older than Box, and this probably wasn't the first time he had taken a hand at this business. But it was apt to be the last for a long time to come. A rustler could depend on at least a

five-year stretch in the pen, if not more.

IT MADE Box uneasy. Outlaw Flat folk usually stood together against trouble, and Box and Ollie both came from there. But he wouldn't condone rustling, and he didn't condemn himself for what he had done. Even if he had killed Ollie, no one would blame him. But he felt uneasy. Something like this might grow into a wall between him and Rosalie.

His uneasiness increased when they reached the J R Connected ranch yard, and talk of hanging, like sudden explosions, spouted at him from half-dressed punchers whose faces he could hardly see. Old Jase Runniman came out of the big house in pants and undershirt, shoving up his gal-luses with a horny thumb, his wattled neck turning red with rage. Cas Pickell, the foreman, carried a lantern, but set it aside when daylight got the best of it.

Ollie had worked here several times on roundup, and most of the crew knew him. Box guessed that most of them liked him. Ollie was loyal to his friends and anyone down on his luck could touch him for what he had. Like all the Kems, he had sparkle, and when Runniman stepped up to him and gave him a flat-handed blow across the face that snapped like a pistol, his dark eyes flamed with fury.

Ez Cormack got scant attention. For him the book was closed, and even Runniman didn't seem to bear any grudge against a corpse. He pointed at one of the punchers and said, "Ready a rope, Ben. You know how."

Box saw Ben move away and start to work on a rope, and all at once he realized this wasn't just violent talk. This was real. He looked around at the faces of the rest of the crew, trying to make out what they thought of it. He looked at Charlie and got a blank look.

"It seems to me he ought to be taken to town and turned over to the sheriff so he could have a trial," Box spoke up, and

looked around to see on what kind of ground his words fell.

The crew looked like they didn't hear him. Runniman gave him a sharp, critical look, but kept right on giving his foreman instructions.

"I've done this before," Pickell finally said with a scowl.

Runniman went back to the house for his shirt and hat, and came out gulping down a piece of snatched breakfast. Ollie still sat aboard the horse that had fetched him back to the house, his hands tied behind him. His head still seeped blood, and flies were beginning to buzz around it. Box moved away from the bunched riders, all his thoughts running riot in his head. Finally he stopped and turned to face them, his gun in his hand, and announced that he didn't intend to let Ollie Kemp get hanged.

Everybody turned to face him. Most of them were still only half-dressed. Runniman had his gun strapped on. So did Charlie Phibbs and Tip Adondo. Cas Pickell balled his fists and came forward mumbling threats.

"Stay back," Box warned. "I'm not foolin'."

Pickell stopped and his face got red. Ben twirled his rope, a small indulgent smile on his face, as if he didn't care whether it got used or not. Charlie Phibbs gave Box a harassed look, as if he didn't know what to do with a bronco who was bound to jump the fence.

"Who d'you think you are?" Runniman roared, suddenly. "Get outa here. Get off this place."

"All right," Box answered. "You give me your word you won't stop us and I'll take Ollie to town."

Runniman wouldn't answer him. He turned on Ollie and shook his fist. "You'll git hung higher'n a kite, my friend. That's a promise."

Ollie faced him wordlessly, his eyes smoky, his body kinked a little to favor the place where Tip Adondo had kicked him.

"All right," Box spoke up, "if you won't give your word, Ollie can go alone. Charlie, will you untie him?"

"Stand where you are, Charlie," Runniman ordered.

Charlie pursed his lips. "He ain't really askin' me, boss," he muttered finally. "He's tellin' me." Then he walked over and cut the ropes.

"You ride to town and give yourself up to the sheriff, Ollie," Box said. "Will you do that?"

Ollie thought it over briefly. "Why, yes, Box, I will," he said at last. "Sure."

The answer brought a small titter running around among the crew. Ollie flushed, then turned to Box as if the others weren't any account. "I give you my word, Box."

"Go ahead then," Box told him. "Somebody'll pick up the horse. Leave it at the livery."

HE SAW to it that Ollie got a long head start. When he was clear out of sight, Box holstered his gun and waited for the storm to break over him. He expected the worst from Cas Pickell. The punchers scuffed around waiting for the next round. Charlie Phibbs disappeared. Tip Adondo leaned against the fence, his face a black smoulder, his finger wadded into the gap left by his broken tooth. Box walked to his horse and started to off-saddle. It was a J R Connected animal, but the gear, of course, was his own.

Runniman took his time about having his say. He finally scooped up the forgotten hang-rope and walked toward Box. When he got close enough, he raised the noosed end and whipped it around Box's neck with all his outraged strength. It bit deep and brought Box to his knees. Pickell sided Runniman with his gun. Runniman laid it on until Box went down on all fours, every blow exploding in his head like a charge of dynamite. Finally, Box flattened out on the ground and the rope lost some of its sting. Then Runniman quit.

"That'll teach you," he stormed. "Now clear out. Take your stuff an' clear out, an' if you ever come near this place again I'll shoot you like a mad dog. Git!"

Box Burnett went home by way of Finnegan's Gap, the only way out of Peppermint Valley. He passed the outlaw tree with its small heap of bleached bones piled neatly against the trunk and wondered if the sight had given Ollie a turn when he passed it on his way to town. He went through the gap and down to Crimson Creek where all his kin and kind lived. He went by way of the Kemps and, with some dread, stopped off at their place to tell them the news. Rosalie was in the yard, and he asked for her father.

"He's gone for the day, Box," she told him. "What's on your mind?" She must have noticed the slashed shirt and the trickle of dried blood on his bare chest, but she didn't ask about it.

Box got down, twinges of pain leaping up and down his back. "There's been some trouble over at J R," he said. "Ollie got messed up with Ez Cormack and that rowdy bunch. They were stealing J R stock and Ez got killed. Ollie was hurt a little and got caught."

She didn't seem surprised, but she stopped her puttering and rested her brown hand on the pump handle. "Where is he now?" she asked.

"He's gone to town to give himself up to the sheriff. I took that promise from him so he wouldn't get hung." He watched her with quiet roving eyes, shifting them away when she looked at him, making a pretense that she didn't stir him any more than any other girl might do. "I shot him myself," he blurted out, determined to let her know the worst.

She reached out and put her hand on his arm in sudden sympathy. "Don't hold it against yourself, Box. I know how those things go." She hesitated. "You're hurt yourself, Box."

"Nothing much. Ollie shouldn't have any

truck with that bunch. He's prison-bound sure, Rosalie. I hope there won't be any hard feelings against me on account of this." He suddenly went dizzy and grabbed for the pump, missed it and fell. "That's the second time I did that today," he muttered, feeling like a fool. "There must be somethin' wrong with me."

Rosalie got him up on a block of firewood and took off his shirt. Her eyes blazed with wrath when she saw his back, and she pumped fresh water and applied it with her hands. Then she found a cloth on the washline and washed his chest. "It's shameful," she breathed. "Purely shameful."

"Seems like I always come to you when I'm in trouble," he told her.

"I don't recall you ever did before."

"I mean when we went to the grammar school. I had plenty trouble there and you got me through it."

"You felt shamed because it was hard for you. I didn't want you to feel so."

"It didn't hurt my pride for you to know I couldn't make it alone."

"No," she agreed. Then in a lower voice: "That was my greatest joy. Do you feel better?"

He nodded.

"I could get some of Pap's corn to brisk you up."

"No."

"It's powerful."

"No. I'm all right."

All at once he caught sight of J R Connected storming through Finnegan's Gap. Rosalie saw them, too. "We got to clear out, Box."

"They'll head for town to see is Ollie there. They won't come this way."

"S'pose they don't find him?"

"They will. He gave me his word. Maybe I ought to follow. They might try to bust him out."

"No. You're not fit to go." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Box, I want to ask—are you fond of me?"

He was stunned. "Rosalie," he said fi-

nally, "you know the answer to that as well as I do, or you wouldn't have asked."

"I expect, but you could give me an answer." She went to her knees beside him, and put her head against his chest.

He lifted his hand and pressed her closer. "I don't have the words for it, Rosalie. It's too deep-abiding. It's been there ever since you helped me with my first numbers. But I never dared to think you even—"

"Just hold me," she breathed. "Don't say anything."

He let out a long quaking breath. "I never knew a man could get such a sky-high feeling so all of a sudden."

"It lifts me up, too."

"I always felt you were someone I couldn't reach. Your pretty looks set you above me."

"If I'm pretty it's in your eyes, Box." She pressed hard against him, setting his blood on fire. Then she flushed and drew back as if she had been too bold. "Are we bespoken, Box?"

He could only nod.

"Then it's the happiest day of my life, even if it seems like mockery to say so in the midst of trouble."

She stood up. "Box, there's no place for you now with these cowmen. You comin' back to Outlaw Flat?"

"I haven't thought on it. It's not to my liking."

"Let's go away from here and find a far place of our own."

"That would suit me, Rosalie."

"Let's go right now, you and me—and Ollie."

"Ollie? He can't go anywhere."

"He can so—" her tongue moved along her lips before she went on—"if we go quick. He's right here, Box. He stopped off to tell, an' I made him stay." She raised her voice. "Ollie, come out here."

OLLIE came out on the porch, his face washed, his hair wet and combed. "She bossed me into it, Box. She said she'd get

you to give back that promise of mine."

Box made an angry, stunned gesture. His eyes lifted to hers. Rosalie looked back, a little defiant, a little ashamed. "She's been workin' at it," Box said, his voice rough with anger.

"I wasn't!" Rosalie cried. "I never thought on it. We got to hurry, Box. I got things to order before you came."

"Don't push it, Rosalie," Box said. "You know what's right and wrong better'n any of us. You always did."

She walked away from him. "Saddle up, Ollie."

"It's up to Box," Ollie put in. "I give my word and I'll hold to it if he won't let me off."

"I can't let you off," Box protested. "I took a stand against their hangin' you, that's all. I went as far as I could."

"All right," Ollie said without reproach. "I'll go on to town then."

"You can't," Box told him. "Runniman's there now with his crew."

Rosalie turned her back and went in the house. "Don't get mad at anybody," Ollie called after her. "You haven't got that right."

He didn't get an answer. The door slammed hard, and the sound of it hit Box like a blow.

"How'd you ever get mixed up with that Cormack crowd, anyhow?" he asked.

Ollie shrugged. "Oh, I don't know."

They went to the barn, and Ollie unsaddled the J R Connected horse and turned it loose. He sounded a little breathless and complained about his ribs. "Tip Adondo must be enjoying this, tearin' around after me. I s'pose you heard about the fight I had with him."

"Yeah, I did."

"He hired a livery rig to take Rosalie home, but she walked the last half anyhow on account of what he tried to do. So I was bound to give him a treatment."

Box nodded wordlessly. He felt bewildered. All the sky-high feeling was gone,

but the taste he had had of that gusty place would leave him forever hungry, with only small memories to fill the empty spaces. In bad weather, on the way to grammar school, she used to wait for a lift across flooded Crimson Creek, and he would grab hold of her and boost her aboard his horse, and when they crossed over she would throw both arms around him and put her head against his back and close her eyes until they got across. Water frightened her, but she wouldn't miss a day, because she was eager for schooling. Eager, too, for him to know what was in the books, secretly correcting his mistakes so he would seem to know as much as she did. Showing a fondness he was hardly ready to accept. Showing it again, here in the yard, when he was ready to return it in full measure, only to find there was guile and treachery in it.

"I saw you two in the yard," Ollie remarked out of a long silence. "It strikes me now that's what you were talking about when you said she had worked at getting you to give me back my promise."

"I was," Box admitted, bleakly.

"I don't think that's fair, Box."

"It was plain enough. I would be downright glad to think she meant what she said."

"There's no cunning in her. I would see it if there was and I would tell you. Why, she's got little stolen knickknacks of yours all over the house. They're altars. Nobody may touch 'em. Let's go back, and you can explain yourself."

"You think she would listen to me?"

"I think so."

They started back, but before they got halfway, Rosalie opened the door and ran out. "They're comin'," she called. "I saw 'em comin' past Phail's." She gave Box a solemn desperate look, as if she wanted to say more. But there wasn't the time. "Come inside, Ollie, quick. Both of you."

Box stopped. "You get inside," he told Ollie. "I'll try to—"

"You better dig out, Box," Ollie broke in. "I'll—"

"No."

"Come inside, both of you," Rosalie called again, and started back.

Ollie started to follow, but it was already too late. Runniman's J R crew swarmed in from all sides. One rider cut off retreat to the house, so even Rosalie didn't get back. Another rider, Tip Adondo, raced straight forward and dropped a rope over Ollie Kemp, dragging him away. With riders swarming around him, Box didn't have a chance to help.

Tip stopped in the middle of the yard and pulled Ollie to his feet. The rest of the crew closed in around them. Box started toward them. Runniman held up his hand and came toward him. "You still tryin' to make trouble?" he demanded.

"Ollie was headin' for town," Box said.

"But he didn't get there, and it suits me right down to the ground. Now you keep out of it." He drew his gun and came a little closer, "I'll take your gun."

HHEAD down, shoulders slumped, Box scuffled toward him. He put Runniman's horse between himself and the crew, and as he came forward his hands went up. Runniman made him turn his back, then leaned down to get Box's gun out of its holster. Suddenly, Box grabbed and pulled him off-balance. Runniman's gun roared, and lead fluffed past Box's ear, but nothing hit him.

Runniman landed with a thud and lost his gun. Box covered him, ramming his gun straight down so it almost touched Runniman's paunch. The horse shied away, leaving Box an open target for the crew. "Runniman gets it if anybody fires a shot," he yelled.

"Watch it, Tip," Cas Pickell barked.

"Don't shoot, boys," Runniman called sheepishly. "He's too hell-fired bound to have his way. It's my fault. I was a fool. We got to backtrack."

"Turn Ollie loose," Box ordered.

"Let him go, Tip," Runniman ordered.

"The hell I will," Tip defied him.

"Make him do it," Box stated. "You're the boss, aren't you?"

"That's an order, Tip," Runniman said. "Don't fool around. Cas, take charge."

Tip suddenly wrapped his rope around the saddle horn, raked his horse, and crashed through the crowd around him. The rope tightened and jerked Ollie off his feet. He slid away in a cloud of dust, arms and legs flailing, bouncing over the bumps. Rosalie let out a sharp scream and started forward, but a puncher caught her arm and stopped her. Box sidestepped and fired a shot.

Runniman eyed his weapon on the ground, but he didn't move. He raised his hand to the others, palm flat against them, and Cas Pickell barked orders. None of them moved. At Box's second shot, Tip Adondo dropped the rope and came back, raking his horse to a dead run, firing as he came. This was no over-reaching loyalty to Runniman. It was only vicious personal hate against Box for blocking his attempt to kill Ollie Kemp.

Wall-eyed, his horse swerved to avoid a collision, but Tip Adondo rode him into a head-on crash. Box bounced away and rolled. He lost his gun, and he almost lost his senses.

Tip Adondo swung in a tight circle and came at him again. Box groped for his gun, but couldn't find it. Adondo poured lead at him; then, seeing the fix Box was in, he pulled his horse to a halt and took aim.

Rumniman roared at him, trying to stop it. He begged and threatened, but Tip Adondo jeered him out of the side of his mouth and tried to go ahead. In the end, Runniman shot him out of his saddle and brought it all to an end.

Before the J R crew headed for home, Runniman spoke to Box. "Later, when we all cool off a little, come up and see me. I may have a place for you after all. I like a man to stand by what he thinks is right, even if it goes against me."

"I'll think on it," Box answered stiffly.

"When you do, remember I could've taken Tip Adondo's side, but I didn't."

"I know," Box admitted. "I saw it. Ollie'll get to town as soon as he's able."

Runniman nodded, and Box got the impression that as far as he was concerned, the thing was at an end. Charley Phibbs moved past and gave him a wry grin. "Hard work, ain't it?"

"What?"

"Livin'."

Box grinned. "I find it so."

"You think too hard on the right and wrong of a thing. That's more of them three R's you claim get you down."

"By my count, that's only two," Box answered. "Right and wrong."

"Pick another, boy," Charlie said. He laughed a little and moved on.

Box tried it out. "Right, 'rong—" He frowned. If there had to be a third it ought to be something to take the sting out of the other two. He found it all of a sudden. "Right, 'rong, and—Rosalie." He hurried to the house to make sure.

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"Hold up, blast you!"
he called. "It's Dan
Cade!"

By GIFF

CHESHIRE

Cade knew he was a fool to leave the snug protection of the wagon train—but he had to find the fiery hellcat who'd vanished into the desert with . . .

The Lost Conestoga

IT WAS shocking and beyond belief, but the last wagon in the emigrant train had simply vanished into thin air. The main party didn't know about the

Sargents' disappearance until evening, when the trailside camp was made. It was full dark when Dan Cade heard the wagon master talking with the driver of what had

all of a sudden become the hind wagon.

"I happened to look back," the driver was saying, "and there wasn't any wagon following me. Right then there was a rise behind me, and I figured it was just on the other side. But an hour later Sargent's wagon was still missing. Leastways, I didn't see it. And I ain't seen it since."

"Wheel trouble, likely," the train captain muttered.

"The devil it was." The other scratched his head. "Old man Sargent kept his wagon and stock in first-class condition. Knew how to drive, too, and there ain't been anything in the trail to bust a wheel on. Cap'n, do you think it was the Diggers?"

The train master shook his head, but Cade saw his face tighten. He had a feeling that the mention of Indians was making the captain a lot more eager to press on up the trail than to turn back to see what had happened.

The train captain rubbed his whiskery jaw, his face looking worried in the flickering firelight. "Well, if they ain't in by morning, we'll send a party back to see. But the wagons can't wait. It's too damned late in the season for my taste, already. Oregon's far away and bad weather's near, and we've got to hurry."

Cade left the group, shaking his head. The Sargent party was a twosome comprised of a waspish old man and a lovely but muleheaded girl. The oldster had sort of cottoned to Cade, but the girl loathed him because Cade had been the only one in the train who would talk back to her.

Cade's outfit didn't amount to much. Heading for the California mines, he traveled alone, with a change of saddle horses and three pack ponies. He reached his dying fire, which was on the south side of the wagon circle.

The desert to the south, star-flung and silent, still disclosed no vague and crawling shape that could be the missing Sargent wagon. Cade was worried, although he didn't take much stock in the idea of Indian

trouble. *That fool girl just got another contrary notion*, Cade told himself. The man had been right about the Sargents' equipment. It was kept in prime shape and handled with expert care.

Dan Cade shook his head. Maybe he was the only one who had noticed that the Sargents seemed badly frightened of somebody in the train itself. Cade had realized for weeks that something ugly lay between the Sargents and two hard-looking individuals who, like Cade, were trailing on horseback. Cade hadn't poked into it, but now his suspicion flared.

Cade was grazing his five horses outside the ring, where the main company's stock was kept. He went out and changed their pickets, moving them farther away from the circle. Ever since the company had entered the desert west of the Mary's, a guard had been kept at night. But, with the right timing, Cade knew he could slip away and do some backtrailing.

First, however, he wanted to check on something here in camp. He stepped between two wagons and began a casual-looking stroll along the inner side of the wide circle. He came finally to a fire that showed him the faces he sought. Hard faces, with watchful eyes. Rhett Varley and Stub Quin had made no friends in the party. But since they were packing out, like Cade, they sometimes passed the time of day with him.

Neither spoke as Cade came into the firelight. Varley was portly, but it wasn't soft fat that rounded his body. His eyes were alert, a little protuberant, and could have been friendly eyes except for the light that lurked in them. Quin's nickname, Stub, fitted him. He was a slack-looking man, obviously little more than a servant of Varley.

Cade grinned at them. "Hear about the wagon that dropped into a hole in the ground?"

"Yeah," Varley said.

"If it was Diggers," Cade continued

chattily, "they'll be sorry they picked old man Sargent. And maybe the girl, for that matter."

"Who cares?" Varley said boredly. "If they can't keep up, the hell with 'em."

Maybe that indifference was real. Cade couldn't be sure as he walked away. He hoped it was real. A desert like this one was no place for any girl to get too willful. To his mind the Sargents, probably on the muleheaded girl's insistence, had only jumped from the skillet to the fire.

Cade had already unrolled his bedding. He tugged off his boots and rolled up in the blankets, too keyed up to fear he would drop off asleep. He lay there for a long while waiting for the big camp to grow quiet, watching the bright stars above him. He was seeing Louise Sargent, up there in the stars, her black hair, her snapping brown eyes, her slim body that was like a whip in its suppleness, and a goad in its warm appeal. A man could make a fool of himself for Louise Sargent.

He got packed and slipped away from the wagon camp without detection, sometime around midnight. The guard, slowly tramping the wagon ring, needed nearly half an hour to make the circle. Cade merely waited until the guard had passed and was gone before he returned.

A prickly feeling was already running the length of Cade's spine. He had a rifle in his saddle boot, a revolver in the holster on his hip. The starlight showed him the wide, wheeled-out trail, and the horse he rode followed it by instinct. The other animals, three under pack, strung out behind him reluctantly, their rest disturbed, their night grazing cut off.

For a long while Cade crossed the desert flatland, a chill waste at night now that winter was just ahead. Cade wore no coat and the cold got into him so that he shivered. He wasn't certain that it wasn't partly fear, but he kept riding at a brisk clip. But nowhere did he come upon a stalled wagon.

FIRST dawn began to lighten the desert horizons. Still Cade was alone upon a lonely expanse. From time to time he looked back. He knew he was too far ahead to see the search party the train would send out at daylight, but if Varley and Quin had decided to go looking for the Sargents, they would have slipped away in the night, too.

Then Cade came upon what he had been almost certain he would find, a place where the light tracks of a single wagon cut away from the main trail. Cade paused to rest his horses. He was grinning a little at the daring, the utter foolishness of what the Sargents had done.

Just past the present emigrant camp, he had heard, the trail bent north at a right angle, continuing in that direction until it was abreast of the Warners, where it headed west again. The Sargents were cutting across that angle and hoping to get ahead of the train without the move being realized. Clearly, then, they were trying to escape from Varley and Quin, as Cade had suspected. Old Sargent had spare draft stock and would probably relay the animals and roll day and night until his wagon was back on the main trail again. A couple of days of that would put the Sargents ahead of the main party.

Now that he knew the disappearance had been planned, Cade had the choice of turning back to the emigrant camp or of going on behind the Sargents. He didn't hesitate, but swung his horses across the sharp angle to the lighter tracks of the fugitive wagon. He was grinning broadly now. The mulehead girl was going to get a surprise when he caught up with her and old Gramps.

Cade discovered, as that morning passed, that catching up wasn't easy. The Sargents were apparently twenty-four hours ahead of him. They were traveling steadily.

It was another night before Cade overtook the fleeing wagon, and he nearly passed it in the dark. The Sargents had

been smart enough to swing off the trail before they made camp to rest their punished stock. If his horse hadn't shown interest in something in that direction, Cade would have ridden right on. Relieved and feeling a sudden embarrassment, he swung in, then cautiously halted to warn the camp of his approach.

"Hello, the Sargent camp!" he yelled

His words were echoed by the sharp crack of a rifle. Cade ducked instinctively, then realized that the ball had passed well above his head.

"Hold up, blast you!" he bawled. "It's Dan Cade! Hunting for you!"

There was a long silence. Then Louise's voice came back to Cade. "Come on in. But don't forget that Gramp's got a gun on you."

Cade didn't forget for an instant. He rode forward. As he drew nearer he saw both Gramp and Louise against the side of the wagon.

"Well, you found us!" Gramp snapped. "But you ain't going back to report it."

"Thanks," Cade said. "I was scared you'd send me scooting. Now, I've ridden a full day on an empty belly, Louise. I'm hungry."

He saw her head toss. She said, "Well go ahead and make camp. You've got food, I'm sure."

"You've got camp already made," Cade said. "If you don't have anything cooked, cook it. Gramp, you're a plagued idiot."

"A live idiot," Gramp growled, "is better than a dead one. Some, anyhow. You the only search party they sent out?"

Cade shook his head. "No. But the others likely wrote you off for suicides, where you turned off the trail, and went back. Though I'm not sure about Varley and Quin."

Louise looked at him sharply. "What do you know about them?"

"Bring my grub," Cade said, "and I'll tell you."

She did, getting it cold from the grub-

box and nearly breaking his thumb when she handed the plate to him. Cade ate with relish.

"All I know," he said then, "is that you're scared enough to run away from them. Why?"

"That's our business."

"Mine, if they catch up," Cade commented, "as they're sure to do. Then you'll need me. So talk."

"You think you're pretty tough, don't you?" Louise asked softly.

"I'm the only man in the world who knows how to handle you," Cade answered. "You take dominating. I'll dominate. And I'll go a little farther, every time, till you act like a woman should."

"Gramp!" Louise breathed. "He's all but threatened me."

"Fine," Gramp said. "Hope he delivers. Tell him about Varley and Quin."

"The hell with that," Louise said.

"Well, you've had more sleep than I have," Cade said cheerfully. "I'll turn in."

IT WAS daylight when he awakened.

The first thing he noticed was the deeply worried look on the faces of the Sargents. Cade felt as if he had been on a three-day drunk, but there was no spare water to wash with.

"You picked your own bite," he told Louise as he walked over to the breakfast fire. "Don't make such a face while you chew it."

Louise seemed too worried to retort. "Do you know how to go from here to get back to the trail?" she asked.

"Certainly," Cade said. "Before I went to bed last night, I laid my rifle so it pointed toward the north star. We go northwest. We should be one day's march ahead of the main party, plus whatever distance we're cutting off."

"Your rifle?" Louise swallowed. "I wish I'd known. I—I picked it up last night. Gramp had his, and we heard something scary. It isn't pointing north now."

"Good Lord, girl!" Cade gasped. Then he realized he had another cause for worry, and he said, "What was it that scared you?"

"I think," Louise said, "that Varley and Quin passed here last night. They'd strayed off the trail and were way west. But it was them or Indians."

"You'd better tell me about those two," Cade said.

"I guess I had." Louise was some frightened to have turned so subdued. "They're after a map we've got. To a gold dust cache somewhere in the Umpquas, in the Oregon Country. They know we've got it. They mean to have it at any cost. Does that satisfy you?"

"No," Cade said, "but this is no place—"

"Moreover," Louise cut in, "they're probably ahead of us, so we'll have to worry about them every step of the way again."

Cade asked, "Why haven't you given them a false copy of the map? They wouldn't know it was fake till they tried to use it, would they?"

"We thought of that," Louise said. "But they want to kill us at the same time they get the map. Getting down to brass tacks, that's what Gramp and I object to most. That gold cache was put there by my father. Dad went to the California mines two years ago. He hit it big. But his health failed, and he knew he was going to die. We had two letters from him. One told us he was going to Oregon and find a land claim so we could come out and live with him."

"He was a right good boy," Gramp said. "He done the whole thing for me and Louise. Varley and Quin ain't going to undo it."

"Why'd he cache the gold dust?" Cade asked.

"The second letter," Louise said, "explained that. He knew he wasn't going to live till we got out there. He didn't know anybody he trusted enough to leave the gold with. He was afraid to hide it on the

claim, because when they're vacant they're jumped. So he buried it in the mountains and mailed us a map showing how we could locate it."

"Varley's seen the map?"

"Varley and Quin," Louise said fiercely, "are a pair of cheap camp robbers. They prowled our wagon back at Gaylor's Landing. They read the letters, but Gramp keeps the map in his boot. Since then, they've tried twice to make us fork it over. They don't want us to reach the Oregon Country to kick up a fuss about it."

"Let's roll our wheels," Cade said to Gramp. "Whoever got this bright idea to leave the train made you sitting ducks for them two."

"Took the chance," Gramp said, "on them not having the grit to follow us—seeing as we're setting ducks for the Diggers, too."

Unwise as it had been, it was the kind of spunky move Cade liked. They broke camp and rolled out onto the desert again. Cade tied his extra horses to the string of spare stock Gramp Sargent had along. Gramp had shown the foresight to stow a couple of extra water barrels in the wagon, and another long and steady haul ought to put them back on the trail. They could get approximate bearings from the sun, and night would show them the North Star again.

Cade rode west until he came to some horse tracks that had been made in the night. Shod horses, six of them. He knew at once it was Varley and his crony, and decided the best idea would be to let them stay ahead. They'd start quartering, now that daylight showed they were off the trail, trying to cut the wheel tracks again. They might get hopelessly lost, or the Diggers might get them.

Cade rode ahead of the Sargents' wagon, watching for sign. He came to a place where the two hardcases had apparently halted in indecision, and then gone on. Presently he came to where the two had

halted and made camp, several miles above where the Sargent camp had been. Cade stopped to study the fresh horse tracks. Varley and Quin were not very far ahead.

Cade swung his horse and put it at a gallop, heading back to the wagon. Louise was on the wagon seat, driving resolutely, her face tawny with dust. The old man was beside her, catching up on sleep missed in the night.

Cade grinned at the girl and said, "You keep racketing along in your bullheaded way and you're going to cut their trail."

Louise hauled back on the lines instantly, looking alarmed. "How far off are they?" she asked breathlessly.

"They've put the horizon behind them," Cade said. "Now, all we've got to do is swing west on a bee-line for the main trail and let them hunt around till they drop dead."

"I wish you were right," Louise said. She had risen on the footboards and was staring intently ahead. "But I see a dust cloud on this side of the horizon, my aggressive friend."

Cade hastily dismounted and climbed into the wagon beside her. Gramp crowded her, and her shoulder touched Cade's arm. He wasn't permitted to enjoy that long, for she really had seen distant dust. It was too settled for a go-devil. He couldn't tell which way it was pointed. The way Cade saw it, that was all the more reason for hurrying back to join the main wagon party.

The only trouble was that he wasn't sure where due west lay. He had no watch but the sun was high, which made it roughly somewhere around midday. So Cade pointed out a westward landmark to Louise and bade her head toward it. The wagon rolled on, without Gramp having ever awakened.

An hour later Louise reported that she could no longer see the dust cloud that had worried them. She sounded enormously relieved, and Cade was even more so, for

the probabilities were that Varley and Quin had been poking on ahead. That afternoon wore slowly away. At dusk they halted to hook up fresh horses. They watered the animals sparingly, then ate from the grub-box and then went on. Full night closed in.

The desert was never a reassuring place in the darkness. They were getting into scabby country now, small upthrusts of rock appearing all about. It was the kind of terrain the Diggers liked for their quick, vicious raids on the emigrant wagons. Cade rode ahead now at the pace of the wagon. He kept as far out as possible from any outcrop of rock. But the reappearing stars had given him back a definite idea of their bearings.

When a rifle shot cracked open the night's stillness, Cade knew the peril was not Indians. Instantly two horses broke out of a rock scab, far to the right, the riders shooting as they came. In one bleak second Cade realized that Varley and Quin had somehow sighted them.

There was a quick, tight scream from Louise as the draft horses bolted. Cade yelled at her as he pulled up his gun and drove his mount straight at the charging riders. The two oncomers separated, spreading apart, still shooting at the wagon. Cade's pistol couldn't reach either man, so he swerved his horse and sent it driving toward the man on his right. He had time to pull out his rifle now. He was lifting it to his shoulder when flame stabbed at him from the rider he sought to cut off. Cade realized that something had hit him hard, that he was leaving the saddle, but he had no knowledge of crashing headlong on the ground.

He was on his back beside the wagon when he opened his eyes. It all came back to him when he heard Gramp Sargent's crusty voice. "Blast you, Varley, take your hands off my girl! You won't find that map on her! Unless that's only your excuse!"

Alarm leaped up in Cade, but all he

could do at the moment was to let out a groan. He heard boots scuff across the sand and looked up to see Varley standing over him:

"So you come out of it," Varley said. "Good. Get up."

Cade was already trying to rise. He had been hit in the left shoulder, he realized, and it was the fall from the charging horse that had knocked him out. The wound hurt and his head ached, but that seemed to be the extent of the damage. Cade managed to get to his feet and remain that way.

Gramp and Louise stood against the wagon, disarmed. Quin was holding a gun on them and watching Cade warily.

"They got hold of you out there," Gramp said to Cade. "Threatened to kill you if we didn't surrender. That scared ten years off Louise's life. She begged 'em to come in and capture us."

"You're a liar," Louise said. "I told them to shoot the man again."

"But you got captured somehow," Cade reflected, and Louise looked away from him.

"Now," Rhett Varley said expansively, "there's a little question as to where we are on this desert, Cade. Old man Sargent says you're pretty good at navigating. So we nursed you back to life if not to health."

"The trail's west," Cade said.

"The point is that we're taken with the Sargents' scheme. We want to get to the trail ahead of the wagon train and keep ahead."

Cade didn't answer. He realized that either Gramp or the mulehead girl must have built up his navigating skill to their captors in order to save his life. That might be the hole card that would help them escape. Some people had a good sense of terrain while other lacked it. From their meandering tracks so far, Cade was pretty sure Varley and Quin had a poor sense of direction. Maybe Cade could find a way to use that weakness in them.

"Now," Varley said to Louise, "you be

the angel of mercy and fix Cade's shoulder."

When Louise bandaged his wound, her fingers were surprisingly gentle. Gramp gave him a slug of whiskey before and another after, and Cade felt reasonably restored when the wagon rolled again. Once more Louise drove, Gramp worriedly beside her on the wagon seat. Varley had taken their guns, with Cade's, and put them in the back of the wagon, since there was a chance they all might yet have to fight Indians. Quin rode on one side of the wagon, Varley on the other, and Varley made Cade ride beside him.

In spite of the unruffled manner they were all showing Varley, Cade knew the prospect was appalling. Varley hadn't got the map yet and didn't want to take the time here to make a thorough search of the Sargent wagon. But once he was back on the trail and sure of his ability to go on through to the Oregon settlements, he would take care to cover his tracks.

THEY trailed that way through the remainder of that long, weary night. Cade pointed the way, and Varley accepted it, trusting Cade because they all had a vital interest in getting off the untracked desert as soon as possible. Gradually Cade bent their course well north of their previous direction, but Varley never noticed. And when day began to appear, the tips of distant mountains loomed on the western horizon.

Varley halted the party and pointed. "Them the Warners?" he asked.

"Mountains, anyhow," Cade said.

"Way we've been going," Varley reflected, "we ought to be two days ahead of the train. On horses me and Quin can dust through well ahead of it." He looked at Gramp and said, "Unhook, Sargent."

"We eatin'?" Gramp asked, a quaver in his voice.

Varley grinned. "Which would you rather do—unhook your stock and let us run

it off into the desert or fork over that map?"

Gramp swallowed, looked at Louise, then sat down on the sand. He pulled off one of his floppy cowhide boots. He upended the boot and shook it until a small, folded paper fell out. He tossed that to Varley, who caught and examined it with open relish.

"Go on, Sargent," Varley said then. "Didn't I tell you to unhook your horses?"

Gramp's eyes rounded. "You crawfish-in'?"

"Unhook, blast it!" Varley yelled.

Cade's flesh had turned cold. The man had got the map without lifting a finger. Now, without compunction, he was betraying the bargain he had offered Gramp. Louise looked so pale Cade wondered why she didn't collapse, but she stood straight with her slender shoulders back.

"If you're going to set us afoot out here," Gramp exploded, "you can do the work yourself!"

Varley looked away from Gramp after a moment and said, "Unhitch, Quin."

Cade said, "Varley, you sure you can find that trail by yourself?"

"Won't be by ourselves," Varley answered. "You'll come along till we're on it for sure."

"No," Cade said calmly. "Abandon the Sargents and you abandon me with 'em."

"Not while I got a gun!" Varley growled.

"Anxious to go where a dead man could lead you, Varley?" Cade said and he laughed.

"All right," Varley said, finally. "We'll roll a while yet."

"I want to water the stock," Gramp said. "You wouldn't understand that, Varley, but they been taking punishment."

"Roll on, blast you!" Varley said.

They traveled on until noon, but still no trail appeared. Even the vague and distant mountain seemed to recede with each mile put behind the wagon. Varley's anxiety was

easy to detect. The man was completely lost, completely dependent on those he held captive. He yearned to see the broad, deep tracks of the main Applegate trail. Finally he halted the party again.

"Hell," Varley said, "we know that trail's west of us. If we keep going west, we're sure to hit it. And I don't want to take this wagon outfit in so close that somebody hunting game for a train might stumble onto it. You stop here. You, too, Cade, and the hell with all of you."

"You've got your map!" Louise said fiercely. "You'll find the cache. Give us a chance to get through."

Quin unhitched the teams and untied the trailed stock, Cade's with it. Varley, pistol in hand now, never relaxed his vigilance. Cade was tempted to make a run at him, but he knew that would be asking for slaughter. Quin, still mounted, hazed the animals well into the northern distance and then returned.

"Cade, go with them!" Louise said suddenly. "You bought into this out of the goodness of your heart! You shouldn't have to die for it!"

A strange warmth filled Cade as he shook his head. Varley was watching Cade anxiously. He was still afraid of tackling the desert by himself. When he saw that Cade was determined to stay, his face grew hard.

"Tie them each to a wagon wheel," he told Quin. "Give Cade the sunny side."

Cade shut his eyes. Bullets would have been more merciful, and Varley knew it.

Quin, with a mocking gallantry, lashed Louise to the hind wheel on what would be the shady side through the afternoon. Gramp put up a fight until Varley laid him cold with his gun barrel. That dissuaded Cade from following suit. Alive and conscious, he still had a chance, however feeble, of getting out of this. He got the hot hind wheel and presently was watching Varley, Quin and their pack animals ride out on a due-west course.

"Well, when do we eat?" Cade called to

Louise, and heard her sobbing, half-hysterical laugh.

That settled the panic rising in him. They still had food, there was still water in Gramp's barrels, and the hooligans had been too confident or too preoccupied to get rid of the guns in the wagon. But Quin had made certain his rope work was good. Cade couldn't budge an inch.

His shoulder hurt and his skin and muscles turned sore from his writhing, but Cade got nowhere. The sun, full upon him, was boiling hot, and he knew that, with his wound, he wouldn't last the afternoon. But he kept on trying to get loose from those ropes.

Cade's head was hanging forward limply, but he lifted it when he heard a joyous cry from Louise. A moment later Gramp came staggering around the front end of the wagon. The old man was grinning.

"Quin made a mistake larruping me with that gun barrel!" Gramp said. "Limp man's kind of hard to tie up real good and tight."

"Get out your jackknife and cut me loose!" Cade gasped.

A few minutes later all three of them were free. Gramp's chafed wrists and ankles showed it hadn't been as easy as he had pretended. But it didn't matter, for they were free.

"We'll eat and rest," Cade said. "Come night we'll foot it south and get back to the trail."

"Head south?" Louise gasped.

"That's where the trail is," Cade told her. "Main trail only runs north the better part of two days march. We've done more than that, cutting west enough so that we're just about due north of the trail now."

"And Varley and Quin went west!" Louise breathed softly. "Wherever will they wind up?"

"From what I've heard of the country," Cade told her, "they'll hit the mountains,

then more desert, then more mountains. I knew they'd strike out alone and head west."

"Justice!" Louise gasped. "Primitive justice. They'll die and they've got it coming!"

"But they've got your map," Cade said. "Won't do them any good, but you'll never find that gold dust. I'm glad of it. A rich wife might get too uppity."

Louise smiled at him. She sat down and pulled off a slipper, then shook out a small folded paper. "You asked me once," she said, "why we didn't prepare a false map to deceive them. I said we'd thought of it. I never got around to mentioning that we also had made it. So you'll have to be contented with an uppity wife." She looked startled. "Why did I say that? I didn't mean to tell you until you'd crawled on your hands and knees to me."

Cade reached for her, but Gramp let out a yell. "We still got to fight for it!" he cried, pointing to the north. "Yonder comes Injuns!"

Something was coming, sure enough. Cade scrambled into the wagon, found the guns and tossed them out. From the wagon seat he paused for a better look. He let out a yell then that would have curled the toes of an Indian.

"Our horses!" he said. "They're coming back!"

It was a moment before Cade understood it, himself. Then he said, "It's the water. Either they smell it or remember they got it from the wagon, and Varley sure let 'em go thirsty!"

Now Cade dropped down from the wagon, joy in his eyes and joy in the eyes of those who watched him. He pulled Louise into his arms.

"Gramp!" he yelled. "I got your girl tamed and now I'm claiming her!"

"Well, go ahead and kiss her," Gramp said absently. "Golly, look at those horses come!"

★ THE DEACON PACKS A NOOSE

By ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY



The man reeled in the saddle,
swaying perilously. . . .

Half guardian angel, half executioner, Deacon Bottle rode with a quart of red-eye and a coil of hemp—to stop a youngster hellbound down the gallows trail.

IT WAS a bullet, though that was the last thing the Deacon had expected. Without warning the lead had come whining out of a deceptively quiet slope of the North Hills, and only the intervention of a branch, which slightly deflected its passage, prevented it from neatly piercing Deacon's Bottle's forehead.

The Deacon's reaction was as swift as it was instinctive. Even as the bullet thudded into the bole of the pine behind him, Deacon Bottle toppled limply out of the saddle.

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He landed awkwardly on one shoulder, the jar bringing a groan of real anguish from his plump lips, but otherwise he was unhurt.

During the brief moment of his fall his probing blue eyes had marked the drifting puff of smoke which told of the bullet's origin. Now, prone, panting and not a little wrathful, he peered at the opposite hill slope from the veiling thicket of huckleberry into which he had rolled.

It had been no accident, of that he was sure. Someone had meant cold-bloodedly to put a slug in him, and had come within an ace of doing so. No second shot, however, came whizzing from the forested hillside. Nor was there the slightest hint of movement. The would-be killer was waiting to make sure of his job, Deacon Bottle thought grimly. His ordinarily mild blue eyes grew a shade or two darker as he touched one of the silver-mounted sixguns at his side. If the unknown gunman across from him was so anxious to see to the Deacon's undoing, he would be given another opportunity.

Keeping prudently under cover, Deacon Bottle began to crawl backward on the first leg of the swing which would carry him around to the opposite side of the little valley.

What made the matter doubly disturbing was the fact that the Deacon's mission in the North Hills had been one of unquestionable innocence. Indeed, for some time past he had lived a life of exemplary straightforwardness, and his most recent preachment, delivered from the bar of the Desert Eagle Saloon in Latigo, had dealt with the advantages of a simple and law-abiding existence. He had even considered, somewhat hazily, to be sure, the permanent turning over of a new leaf. But that had been after the second quart of Old Pepper.

On this particular morning, thoroughly at peace with the world and pleased with himself, he had been enjoying the quiet of his favorite haunts, the North Hills.

Though the Deacon's knowledge of the nooks and crannies in that rugged strip of country was singularly extensive, he never wearied of exploring them further. And to a man of Deacon Bottle's occasionally wayward habits, that intimate knowledge had proved valuable.

Keeping himself well shielded from view, it took him all of half an hour to cross the valley at a lower spot and work back toward the retreat from which had come the tell-tale puff of powdersmoke.

During that time his unrelenting scrutiny had detected no motion of any kind. For all the sign that it gave him, he might have been stalking a stone. But the canniness of his attacker did not disarm the Deacon. Somewhere within a circle of not more than a dozen yards diameter, the gunman was lurking, ready probably to pump another bullet into him if he showed himself.

The silent deadliness, the cold-blooded patience of the unknown man with the rifle, made the Deacon's smooth and pinkish countenance set stiffly. In a few moments there would be one bushwhacker less in the Latigo country—or the preachments of Deacon Bottle would be stilled forever.

Belying down, the black of his patched frock coat stained with dirt and leaves, he crawled steadily forward. He knew that he was now within easy gunshot of the place, but still no target presented itself.

Then he caught it—the glitter of the sun on a rifle barrel. Carefully Deacon Bottle lifted one of the silver-mounted guns from its holster, and with the weapon projecting before him, inched ahead.

There was not the least sign that his attacker was alive or even in existence. Suddenly then, rounding a little heap of rock, the Deacon had his first view of the would-be killer. A stunted cluster of pine seedlings protected him in front, but from the rear he was plainly exposed. Crouched on his knees, the man's hands had fallen away from the rifle which was resting in a crotch

before him. There was not even a quiver of his slouched body. He presented a picture of utter and abandoned dejection; his shoulders had slumped down, his back was curved listlessly, his head had fallen forward on his chest.

Deacon Bottle's booming voice cut icily through the stillness. "Turn around, mister, an' be primed to shoot when you do!"

THE abrupt words appeared to startle the kneeling man. A tremor passed through his hunched figure. Slowly, as if in bewilderment, his head lifted and turned so that he was staring over his shoulder.

And the Deacon, returning that stare, allowed the muzzle of his gun to drift down. He saw a face that was haggard and old, half obscured by a straggle of wispy gray whiskers, and racked by an expression of indescribable sorrow and regret.

Deacon Bottle was staggered. Here was no practiced murderer. He could have sworn that the old man's fingers had fallen away from the rifle the instant he had fired the shot, and that he had not moved since. Something in that desperate look on the oldster's haggard face stirred the Deacon profoundly.

Disbelief sprang into the old fellow's eyes, and beneath his thin beard his lips were trembling. "You—you ain't dead?" he whispered huskily. "Thank God for that."

Deacon Bottle grunted, still angry. "What in the devil. . . ." he began.

But the old man had shaken his head jerkily, as if flinging an unwanted thought out of his mind. Straightening his cramped knees, he sprang to his feet, the ragged denim coat flapping from his gaunt shoulders. One gnarled and bony hand clenched and rose in the air; the look hurt on his old face was superseded by one of overwhelming bitterness.

"I wish I had killed you," he exclaimed shrilly. "God knows, I tried to."

"You came blamed near doing it," snapped the Deacon. Striding ponderously forward, he shook the oldster by the shoulders. He recognized him now. It was Old Man Brinker, who had been trying with miserable success to wrest a living from the rugged North Hills with dozen or so head of cattle. "You gone crazy?" he demanded.

Brinker jerked himself loose as if the Deacon had had the plague. He fell away, his faded eyes blazing. "Well, go ahead an' do it," he cried furiously. "What you waitin' on?"

"Do what?"

"Plug me. You're goin' to, ain't you? Like the damn killer you are. You'll be safe enough. There won't nobody ever know who done it." The energy left Brinker sharply, and his voice dropped so that it was scarcely audible. "You've made a clean sweep of the rest of it. Might as well finish me off, too."

"Blamed if I know what you're talkin' about," said Deacon Bottle gruffly.

Tears of helpless rage stood in old Brinker's eyes. "All news to you, ain't it, Deacon?" he blurted. "Of course, you'd say that. You ain't had a hand in the rustlin' up here, have you? You've never even laid eyes on my boy, have you? You ain't the black-hearted gent that's made a hunted outlaw out of him—oh, no not you. Not Deacon Bottle—him that preaches the Word of Almighty one day an' then goes out an' ruins a man's life the next!"

A troubled expression came into the Deacon's mild blue eyes as he slid his gun back into leather. "Whoever says that, lies," he said softly.

Brinker's voice burst harshly from his throat. "I say it, Deacon! As likely a lookin' son as a man ever had, gone to hell on account of you."

So fiercely intent was the old man's gaze that for a time the Deacon could think of nothing to say. But at length he spoke steadily. "Irv Brinker is your son, is he? I've seen him once or twice. Spoke to him,

maybe. Other than that I've had nothing to do with him. If what you said was true, Brinker, I'd stand up and let you take another shot at me with that .30-.30 of yours."

THE old man had struggled to his feet again. His wasted frame inclined forward as he studied Deacon Bottle's round face with a pitiful eagerness. What he read there must have shaken his savage resolve, for when he spoke again his tone was broken, more imploring than wrathful.

"Then it ain't you that's been runnin' off Jukes' cows? It ain't you who got my boy to help him 'cause he knowed these hills?"

Deacon Bottle shrugged. "I could show him holes up here he's never got within half a mile of."

Old Man Brinker sank wearily down on a log. "Didn't see as how it could be anybody else," he mumbled. "Thought, o' course, it had to be you. Everybody says—"

"Folks say a lot of things they can't prove."

"I reckon that's what makes Irv think it'll be so damn easy. He figures you've got away with it an' he kin too."

The Deacon knew that rustling had been going on. It was not an uncommon thing for one or another of the bigger outfits to be complaining about the loss of a little stray beef, but within the past month the thieving had mounted alarmingly.

"Maybe," he suggested not unkindly, "you better give me an idea what this is all about."

A groan broke from Old Man Brinker's lips. "It don't come right, somehow—a man talkin' this way about his own son. Irv's a good boy, apt to take the bit in his teeth, mebbe, but he ain't bad. We been havin' a tough time makin' a go of things up here. Blamed little to eat, even, sometimes. Well, Irv got to figgering there was

faster ways of makin' money than waitin' for a dozen cows to drop calves. He got mixed up with some gents that're handy with a runnin' iron, an' decided to play it that way. They're usin' him. That's all they're doin', but he can't see it. When they're through with him he'll get a slug in his briskit an' nothin' else, I reckon."

"Makin' a regular business of it, is he?" asked the Deacon sharply.

"Kind of. He's been out with 'em three times so far. I follered him the last time, but he slipped away from me." Fire smouldered in the old man's eyes. "Hell, there was nothin' I wouldn't have done to stop him!"

"Even—" began Deacon Bottle.

"Yeah," said Brinker huskily. "I'd have done murder, thinkin' to help him. I figured you was the man, Deacon. God knows I ain't a killer, but when it meant that Irv—that my boy—" The oldster couldn't finish.

"There's some things," said the Deacon, "that it takes a lot of nerve to do."

"I knew I wouldn't stand a chance against you in a straight stand-up fight," replied Brinker wretchedly. "It was the only way I could think of. On account of Irv, I'd have done anything. I—I thought I'd killed you. I was goin' down to—to give myself up."

One of the Deacon Bottle's plump hands reached out and rested on Old Man Brinker's gaunt shoulder. "Forget it, old timer. Might be I could do somethin' to help you out. Next time the kid lets it out that he's goin' on a pasear, get word down to me in Latigo."

"He don't say nothin', but I can tell," Brinker said eagerly. "He gets nervous as a cat. D'you think, Deacon—"

Deacon Bottle cut him short with a feigned brusqueness. "Can't say if it'll do any good, but I'll do what I can."

Some hours later, having proceeded in a very leisurely fashion, Deacon Bottle was letting his mount drift at an ambling trot

down the main street of Látigo which nestled comfortably at the base of the North Hills.

As he drew abreast of Sheriff Enoch Starling's office, a voice, high-pitched and ominous, carried out to him: "Damn it, Starling! Nothing scares out a cow thief faster than hangin' him!" It was big Addison Jukes, the Deacon knew, owner of the mighty TN spread.

Casually the Deacon stepped down and propelled his portly frame toward the office. The suggestion of a frown marred the smoothness of his forehead. Addison Jukes, a physical power-house goaded by an honest but quick-tempered energy, usually did whatever he swore he was going to do.

As Deacon Bottle set foot on the walk, Jukes appeared in the doorway, red-faced and boiling, hurling a last threatening word over his shoulder. "By hell, if you can't stop it, I will! An' I'll stop it with a hang-rope!"

The big rancher brushed past the Deacon with the curtest of nods and strode off, shaking his head like an angry bear.

Inside, the Deacon found the brawny, mustached Starling regarding his paper-strewn desk with vicious disfavor. The sheriff's eyes lifted to level an accusing glance at his old friend.

"Deacon, you old fraud," he snapped. "You ain't got a finger in this pie, have you?"

"Me?" protested Deacon Bottle mildly. "A servant of the Lord?"

Starling snorted. "Well, for once in your life," he grumbled, "I don't think you have. Jukes is dead set on the idee that it's local talent. Me, I think different." He flipped a crudely lettered hand-bill across to the Deacon. "Got word a week or so ago that this sweet-lookin' hell-hound was headin' this way. Blackie Harbin. There's a couple thousand bucks on his head down in Idaho. If my guess ain't wrong, he's the lad that's snakin' beef out of Jukes' back yard."

Deacon Bottle studied the picture solemnly. "Be quite a job gettin' him to hold still while you put a rope around his neck," he said finally.

This remark restored the sheriff to his former train of thought. "Damn Jukes, anyhow," he complained. "Always roarin' like a clubbed bull an' goin' off half-cocked. The hell of it, he'll do it, too. String up some poor devil, I mean." He jabbed a seamed forefinger at the Deacon, "You stay out of the North Hills till this blows over, Deacon."

"Stay out of 'em? What in hell for?"

"You got a head on you. Figger it out," growled Starling. "I don't say you're mixed up in it, but you know what folks think. Anything happens around here an' first thing they start askin' is where you was at the time. If Jukes catches you wanderin' around loose in the hills, he'll likely act first an' talk when it's too late."

With an abrupt wave of his hand he checked the Deacon's exclamation. "You'd do the same damned thing if you was in his shoes, Deacon. Watchin' his herd bein' whittled out from under him drives a man plumb panicky. Right now Jukes craves action. I'm doin' what I can, but it ain't enough to please him."

"Maybe we ought to make him sheriff," suggested Deacon Bottle blandly.

"Go to hell," retorted Starling. "But I'm warnin' you, Deacon, steer wide of them hills. Jukes'll be ridin' 'em constant, an' he'll have a gun crew with him."

FOR two days Deacon Bottle lounged in seeming comfort. The comfort, however, penetrated no deeper than his surface appearance. Beneath it he was sorely troubled by the problem which faced him. In a moment of weakness he had intruded on a matter which was actually none of his concern, and had passed his word to help Old Man Brinker insofar as he was able. If he trekked into the North Hills, as he undoubtedly must, there was an excellent

possibility that he would not emerge hide-whole, if, indeed, he emerged at all.

Deacon Bottle sighed regretfully and pulled sturdily at the tumbler of whiskey before him. The streak of sentiment within him was continually driving him into holes which were not only unpleasant but decidedly dangerous.

It was nearing dusk and the Desert Eagle was beginning slowly to fill. The Deacon had hoped that sufficient quantities of Old Pepper would relieve his mind of its troublesome problem, but he found that he could not turn the matter away. He even hoped, with a certain feeling of guilt, that Old Man Brinker would neglect to inform him of the next projected raid.

He had seen Irv Brinker once during the interval, and had judged him to be no worse than any other youngster of his age who finds life on a broken-down little cow outfit more drab than glamorous. The kid wasn't built to be an outlaw, the Deacon thought, unless he got the kind of break which wrecks a man's life before it is well begun.

And Deacon Bottle sighed again. He would have to do what he could. Talking would be useless, of course, but a plan born of the phrase used by Addison Jukes had begun to take shape in the Deacon's mind.

"Nothing scares out a cow thief faster than hanging him!" Jukes had said.

Deacon Bottle had been close enough to the noose a time or two himself to recognize the truth of that statement. If Irv Brinker could be given a taste of that treatment—and the Deacon felt that he could provide a sample—the boy might be persuaded to alter his plans for a roving life.

The tumbler was half way to the Deacon's lips again when he caught sight of a shabby little figure which came plummeting through the swinging doors and halted to stare wildly around the room. One look at the disturbed countenance of Old Man Brinker was enough to assure Deacon

Bottle that, whether he liked it or not, he was due to head into the North Hills that night.

"Left yet?" was his first question when the worried oldster had hurled himself into a creaking chair.

With a tattered coat sleeve Brinker dabbed at the sweat streaking his forehead. "Hadn't when I started out, Deacon, but I reckon he's goin' to. I kin tell. Blamed near took my head off 'cause there was nothin' but beans for supper. He ain't really a ornery kid, Deacon, only—"

Deacon Bottle was gathering his frayed frock coat about him. "Where'd you trail him to, last time he went out?"

"Bout three miles in," explained Brinker with pathetically eager haste. "You know them twin shoulders back of my place? Run through them an' cut right past the timber. There's a crick there; foller it mebbe half a mile an' then head sharp northwest into a dry canyon. Mile or so up from the mouth it sprays out into a hell of a batch of little washes. That's where I lost him. Me, I'm figgerin' to trail along with you, Deacon."

The Deacon shook his head as his eyes lingered for a last thirsty moment on the liquid remaining in the whiskey bottle.

"You're cracked," he said roughly. "What the hell would I want a dodderly old coot like you along for? Stay here an' keep out of the way."

The hurt look which flashed into the old man's face told Deacon Bottle that he had won his point. It had been the only way. He knew too well what he might run into. If Addison Jukes' hang-crew should stumble on them, Old Man Brinker, because of the company he was in, would be cheerfully hanged alongside the Deacon. It was a risk the Deacon preferred to take alone.

It was only a matter of minutes then before the Deacon was pulling out of Latigo at a sharp trot, with two extra mounts, riderless, briskly jogging along behind him.

THROUGH the remnants of twilight he pushed steadily into the darkening hills. It was nearly dark when he reached the twin promontories, and wholly so by the time he came out of the timber. He had made good time, and good enough speed, he hoped, to cut off Irv Brinker. By the scanty rays of the moon he proceeded gingerly up the pebble-bottomed creek, slipped at length into the dry canyon and followed it cautiously to the point where it lost itself in a maze of higher gullies.

There, after disposing of the horses at some distance, he settled himself patiently to wait. An hour rolled sluggishly by, and then another. The Deacon's reflections became flavored with a trace of suspicion. What if the whole thing were a hoax, a wild fabrication invented by Old Man Brinker to cover up the attempted murder? The more Deacon Bottle examined the story the more improbable it appeared. By his own admission Brinker needed money, and as the Deacon sat hunched in the quiet of the blackly looming hills, it seemed infinitely more likely that that rifle bullet had been intended as a forerunner to robbery. Perhaps—

The Deacon stiffened suddenly. Beating up the canyon to him came the measured clop of hoofs. It was one horse, Deacon Bottle decided, and he dragged his right-hand gun from its leather.

In the dim illumination which pervaded the scene, a rider came plodding into the sandy open space. The moment Deacon Bottle had heard the hoofs, he had crouched against the canyon wall, a stumpy black form in the moonlight. He prayed fervently that the kid wouldn't be fool enough to want to shoot it out.

The languidly swaying figure in the saddle . . . the plodding bronc, head lifting . . . the high, black wall of the canyon beyond . . . a night-hawk's cry piercing the stillness.

Then Deacon Bottle, in a voice much harsher than his own, was blurting, "Grab

stars, boy, or I'm blowin' all hell out of you!"

A sharp intake of breath came from the boy.

"I mean it, damn you," rasped the Deacon. "Don't move!" Then when the slim figure in the saddle had frozen: "Swing around back to me. Stir a finger, my lad, and the coyotes eat hearty in the mornin'."

A jerk, and the Deacon was breathing more easily with the kid's gun out of his reach. Swiftly he took a bandana from a rear pocket and looped it over young Irv Brinker's eyes, pulling the knots hard.

With a coolness the Deacon liked, the kid said, "What's the play, stranger?"

"Maybe you ain't heard," Deacon Bottle responded drily. "Gents that's handy with a wide loop generally wind up drinkin' outta their own cup." Swiftly he lashed the boy's hands behind him. Then he began to lead the horse up into the wash in which he had left his own mounts.

"You mean hangin'?" young Brinker burst out scornfully. "You got no proof you can string me up on."

"Wrong, kid. A rope's all the proof you need with a cow thief. We got that."

"Who's we?"

"Don't matter to you, does it, long as we do the job right?"

They came to where the three horses had been tied. The Deacon's mount whinnied; one of the extra horses stamped loudly. Still disguising his voice, Deacon Bottle called out in a low tone, "Here he is, boys. Damn fool walked right into it."

HE MOVED half a dozen paces out in front and began a jumble of talk in an undertone, wrangling with himself as if three or four men were holding a heated but low-voiced discussion. He wound it up by announcing loudly enough for the boy to hear:

"To hell with waitin'. There's a dead pine yonder that's good enough. What do

you say?" . . . "Suits me. Sooner done the better." . . . "Hold on; though. Maybe he'll talk. Give him a chance to talk."

Deacon Bottle walked back and stood looking at the boy on the horse. Beneath the fringe of the bandana the Deacon could see the muscles bunched rigidly along the kid's jaw. For a moment he felt a twinge of compunction for the boy, but he shook it off. It was a grim joke he was playing, but no grimmer than the boy's inevitable end would be if it were not played.

"How about it, kid? Maybe you'd like to talk to save your own neck. Who was in on it, an' where kin we lay hold of 'em?"

"Bluff!" the boy snapped. "You got nothin' to go on. You can't hang me."

"Can't, eh? All it takes is a rope an' a tree, kid. Don't forget that."

They rode the fifty yards or more to the point in the wash directly below the dead pine. Deacon Bottle wondered what the boy was thinking about—riding blindfolded through the night, his hands tied behind him, surrounded by the men who were going to hang him.

"Gimmie a rope, somebody," directed the Deacon when they stopped. Lifting his own from the saddle, he flung one end up over a projecting limb. Twice he purposely missed his cast. The slithering rattle of the hemp as it fell back to earth made an eerie sound in the dark, brooding stillness.

The rope caught at last. With his pudgy fingers turned suddenly awkward Deacon Bottle began to fashion a hangman's noose in the dangling end. It was the first one he had ever made. It was rough, and it lacked the requisite number of turns, but then. . . .

Something in the inexorable grimness of the moment struck home to the Deacon's heart.

He kicked his mount alongside the boy, dropped the noose over the muffled head. As he let a hand fall to the boy's shoulder he felt the lean, muscled body trembling.

He wondered what young Irv Brinker was feeling. It was a terrible thing to know that in the next minute or two life would be dragged agonizingly out of your body. The Deacon had felt it, and how.

"No bluff, kid," he said hoarsely. "Got any talkin' you want to do? You won't get no more chances."

He put the question again because he had wondered what Irv Brinker would say. Though it would make no difference now, Deacon Bottle was curious what kind of a boy, or man, he had taken his risks for this night.

He got his answer—brokenly, but he got it: "Go to hell."

"All right," said Deacon Bottle. "You've named it."

He kneed his mount away from the boy, leaving him alone. The thing was almost over. A chip of rock, flung from a distance, would make the pony jump out from under Irv Brinker, would give him that final foretaste of a thief's end. The Deacon had planned out what was to happen then. He was to cry out, as if he had stumbled unawares upon the scene. He was to fire a shot or two, and then rush down and cut the hangrope. A word or so to the boy—"Damned narrow thing, kid. Get the hell-out of here"—before he packed him off as if the devil were whipping at his heels.

Carefully Deacon Bottle opened his clasp knife, gripped it tightly in his left hand. In his right he held the rock sliver. It was time. He drew his arm back. But he held it there, motionless.

From farther up the wash came faintly the beat of moving broncs. The sound swelled through the night air. Deacon Bottle had a hazy glimpse of an irregular bulk advancing down the wash.

Then the quiet was ripped sharply by the boy's scream.

"Blackie! Blackie! For God's sake, Blackie, they're hangin' me!"

For the next split-second Deacon Bottle

was too surprised to move. Blackie Harbin! But was it Harbin or Addison Jukes patrolling the hills with his crew of lynch-hungry riders?

In the next moment the upper wash became dotted with darts of crimson flame. The thunder of gunfire rocketed back among the lofty peaks. Hit, the horse beneath Irv Brinker let out a scream of pain, lurched ahead. The boy was jerked off; he swung like a twitching pendulum at the end of the rope.

CURSING his own shortsightedness, the Deacon spurred forward desperately. He saw now what was happening. He should have guessed that it was somewhere in the vicinity that Irv Brinker was to have met the outlaws.

One of the Deacon's own guns was blazing and bucking in his fist, striving belatedly to stem that hail of lead from the upper wash. It was not the Deacon at whom that lead was being directed. It was the swaying body of the boy. Old Man Brinker had guessed the thing truly. Harbin and the others had merely been using the boy. Now they were through with him—or else, giving him too little credit for courage, they were afraid that the noose would unloosen his tongue. Their attack was no daring rescue; it was a brutal murder.

Deacon Bottle slashed at the rope with his knife, feeling as he did so the chunk of lead slamming into the boy's body. He shot twice more from the saddle, had the brief satisfaction of seeing the clump of riders above him split up. Then he had rolled out of the leather, picked up Irv Brinker in his thick arms, and was running with him to the overhanging edge of the wash.

Bullets dogged every foot of the way, snipping at the cloth over his broad shoulders, tearing his trouser leg.

Close against the crumbling gravel of the wall, he sliced away the ropes bind-

ing the boy's wrists, and tore off the bandana.

Irv Brinker wriggled to his knees, trying to adjust the focus of his eyes. "Blackie?" he whispered.

"Blackie, hell," growled the Deacon. "It's Blackie that tried to plug you, you blamed fool!"

He flipped a shot at a shadowy figure which had edged too far out into the open. Harbin gave no sign of a intending to throw up the fight as a bad job. He had the weight of numbers on his side—there were three men with him, the Deacon judged—and he apparently more set than before in his conviction that Irv Brinker must be killed. The outlaws had taken to the walls along the upper portion of the shallow wash. The Deacon knew it would not be long before they climbed out of it to encircle their quarry.

"Hit?" he asked the boy quietly.

"In the leg."

"Bleedin' any? Couldn't walk on it, I reckon?"

"I could make a stab at it."

But from the jerky way the boy talked Deacon Bottle knew that there would be no getaway for them. Whatever fight there was to be, they would make it where they were, with the odds strongly against them. Looking at the boy, he could see only the pale blot of his face. For a kid who had seen his pals turn against him and try to kill him, he was taking it quietly. The Deacon felt a surge of liking for the boy.

"How'd you happen to be there?" asked Irv suddenly.

"Me?" Deacon allowed the words to slide out casually. "Accident, I'd call it. I was rammin' around for the hell of it. This country kind of gets in my blood. Blundered up this way. Met three-four gents whooping out of here like a grizzly'd clawed 'em. Found you with your neck in a rope an' Harbin over yonder tryin' to pump lead into you. Look out, kid!"

The flurry was over in a moment. Lead

tore into the gravel above them. The Deacon's gun roared twice. One of the outlaws had crawled along the top of the wash opposite them. He lay now hanging half over it, his face buried, arms dangling.

The boy stirred restlessly. "Got another iron, Deacon? I can use one."

Irv Brinker's pistol was tucked in the Deacon's waist band, but he said nothing of that. Without speaking he tugged out his left hand gun, handed it to the boy.

FOR a time that dragged out endlessly they crouched side by side, fingering their guns, waiting for the bullets which might be expected any moment from any quarter. Then softly through the moon-streaked dimness came the rattle of bit chains and hoofs chugging in sand.

Irv Brinker leaned forward, straining his eyes up the wash. "They're pullin' out," he muttered.

A guttural phrase floated down the gully. "Get movin'. No use goin' after Billy. He's done for."

"That's Harbin," breathed the boy. There was a queer, harsh ring to his voice.

Deacon Bottle pulled him back. "Stay down, you fool. This ain't over."

From farther up in the hills a new voice echoed hollowly. The words sounded as if they were being shouted between cupped hands. "Hello, below there! Stand where you are. We're coming down."

There was a rush and flurry of hoofs after that. Jamming fresh loads into his gun, the Deacon snapped, "Watch yourself, kid. Harbin can't get out above. He'll try to run through us."

There were bellowed, indistinguishable commands in Blackie Harbin's hoarse tones. There was the jostle and grunt of racing horses. The boy was laughing. Deacon Bottle swore as his fat fingers tightened on the gun in his waist band and yanked it free. This was two-gun work now.

A lifetime of patterned movement and

blaring sound fled by in a matter of seconds. Flame spears bristled across the wash. Hurling figures loomed in the gloom. Two of them were coursing down the bottom while the third flew like a black spectre along the upper rim.

From above, the smaller sound of distant shooting boiled down to join the melee. Hot powdersmoke from the Deacon's gun was coiling up into his nostrils, searing his lungs. He heard the boy laughing again, and saw one of the horses in the bottom go down as if he had dropped into a pit. The roar of exploding six-shooters drummed into his ears.

The man on the rim, whose mount evidently had better footing, had drawn almost abreast of them. He was hanging low over the straining neck, shooting as he rode. Calculatingly, Deacon Bottle trained his weapon on the speeding figure, thumbed the hammer. The man reeled in the saddle, swayed perilously before toppling off.

Then, at that instant, the Deacon felt a terrific wrenching pain shoot up his arm to the shoulder. A bullet had struck his gun fairly above the trigger guard, snatching it out of his grasp, and numbing his whole arm. His startled gaze flew up to perceive that the last of the three raiders was not a dozen paces off, sweeping up at a dazzling speed.

He saw, too, that Irv Brinker had staggered somehow to his feet. The boy was hopping, hopping on his one good leg, out into the path of the man the Deacon knew to be Blackie Harbin.

The Deacon saw the blaze from the muzzle of the silver-mounted revolver the boy held. With the grip on its reins gone, the horse swerved sharply. Blackie Harbin, his body suddenly limp, pitched headlong into the sand. . . .

It was some minutes before big Addison Jukes came pounding up with a good half dozen of his riders. He swung down, advanced to Deacon Bottle warily.

(Continued on page 110)

Boothill Boundary

*Which comes first—your daughter's
love . . . or the tin star you've sworn
to serve?*



John had to make a very
fast draw. . . .

COMING out of the blackjacks, John Green saw the horses moving again in their everlasting circle beside the hay baler. He frowned with slight displeasure.

Sunlight lay bright over the meadow; the scene was a pleasant one of heat and work, with the teamsters buck-raking giant loads of loose hay to the baler, the pitchers forking the green-gold stuff to the feed table, sweat glistening on the horses' backs. Despite his displeasure, John Green felt a warm glow, for this was

By CLARK GRAY

the kind of thing he liked, the kind of thing he had missed since his old wounds had driven him from ranching to a town job. He thought that a man would never guess from looking at it that there'd been a killing here this morning.

He nudged his horse and moved down into the little meadow, a tall gaunt man in his fifties, showing his age. At the baler he dismounted. Roy Whitfield was on the baler, expertly ramming hay into the hopper with a small straight-tined pitchfork. Roy Whitfield grinned cheerfully, not breaking the rhythm of his work.

"Morning, Sheriff. You got here in a hurry."

John Green noted the sweat darkening Roy Whitfield's shirt; he noted the energetic movements of the young man, the raw vigor of him. For a moment John almost hated Roy Whitfield for bringing on this trouble, this ruin. John Green said, "Come here, Roy," and turned, leading his horse back out of earshot of the crew.

Fifteen yards away he halted and waited for Roy Whitfield to jump to the ground, gun-belt flopping up around his waist. Roy showed no sign of uneasiness. Roy's face was the same as always, firm, tanned, with no fat on it. The face of an energetic young man who was working hard. As Roy joined him, John Green said:

"Roy, it don't seem fitten to me to keep on baling. Not with Amos dead."

Roy Whitfield shrugged, and there was no embarrassment in him, no hint of shame or sorrow.

"Maybe not, Sheriff. But there's a bank of rain clouds in the west. We had this meadow cut. I thought we ought to get it in before the rain spoils it." Roy shrugged wryly. "After all, I got nothing against Amos' cows, even if I did kill the man that owned 'em."

JOHN GREEN pulled out his pipe and tamped it absently with a broad thumb. "You did kill him, then? I just want to

get the facts all straight, Roy. You killed him, and you admit it?"

"I admit it," Roy Whitfield said. "But killing isn't murder, Sheriff. Not necessarily."

"Nope."

Sheriff John Green pondered, feeling his mind slip off at a tangent. He had always liked young Roy Whitfield, had been pleased at Roy's evident interest in Joanne. That would make it harder now, he knew. He thought fleetingly about town gossip and votes and next November's election, and he could not see any way he could come out of this with a whole skin. But that didn't matter now, he told himself. Joanne's happiness was the thing he had to salvage. He grunted irritably, feeling the sun's heat soak into his shirt and bring sweat to his shoulders.

"This is a hell of a place to think. Well, Roy, there's only one thing I can do. I'll have to take you in for questioning. Then there'll have to be an inquest, and you'll have to wangle it out with the coroner's jury. You got somebody to manage your crew?"

"Uh-huh." Roy Whitfield strode back to the baler and spoke a few words to the man working the feed table. When he rejoined the sheriff, his tanned young face was lined with unaccustomed grimness. "All ready, Sheriff. I'll answer anything I can. Only thing is—it's going to be hard for you to believe me."

Sheriff John Green's office was like the man. Completely masculine, completely utilitarian. It had a roll-top desk, scarred by years of spurred boots. It had a spittoon, a filing cabinet, a gun shelf, and a hatrack. It had a lamp swinging from a chain in the ceiling, and it had green paper blinds. It smelled of dust and stale tobacco. John Green liked it here; he felt at home.

He rolled up the blind at the east window, then grunted as the streaming sunlight sent heat boiling into the room. He

yanked the blind back down and crossed to his desk.

The picture of Joanne and Ginny was there, looking strangely out of place in this room. It was an old picture, taken some ten years ago when Joanne was eight, a dark little girl in pigtails, showing just a little of Ginny's laughing vivacity. John was in the picture, too, with his hand on Ginny's shoulder. Looking a little younger than now, a little soberer, a little prouder of the shining silver badge and the walnut-butted guns. But not much different, really, for ten years. John Green wondered vaguely how those years could have changed him and Ginny so little and Joanne so much. For Joanne was a grown woman now, and there'd be hell to pay when she found out he'd arrested Roy Whitfield.

John sighed. "All right, Roy. Let's have it. Why'd you kill him?"

Roy Whitfield sat easily in the straight-backed chair with the cracked leg. "I killed him," Roy said, "because he pulled a gun on me. He said I was stealing from him. Said I'd butchered a calf of his."

"Amos said *that!*" John brought his feet off the desk with a thump. "Oh, hell, now, Roy! You won't get nowhere that way!"

"I told you you wouldn't believe it. It sounds crazy, but it's true. Why would I want to steal a calf? What would I do with it?"

John Green put his feet back up on the desk and rubbed his chin thoughtfully with the back of his hand. He thought about Amos Byers, the bluff, secretive old rancher whom Roy had killed. Amos had been one of the first settlers here. He'd bought his land direct from the Sago Indian Agency, before territorial days. There had been rustler trouble in those days, but that was thirty years back. Certainly to suspect a man of rustling nowadays, especially a man like Roy Whitfield, was wild imagining.

John thought about Roy, about the boy's ambition. Roy had worked as a common hand until he'd saved enough money to stake himself to a hay baler. With his custom baling, Roy was trying to accumulate enough funds to go into ranching on a substantial basis. But at the moment Roy had no land, no place even to keep a butchered calf. Roy roomed in town at the hotel.

John said, "And you shot him because he was going to arrest you?"

"I shot him because I knew he was going to kill me, Sheriff. I could smell it on him. He—he seemed to go crazy. Look, I don't pretend to understand it, but there was something haywire with Amos."

"That's no good, Roy. Oh, hell, it *could* be the way you say. But it ain't like Amos to accuse a man of stealing when that man's got no reason to steal, and no way to hide it if he did. The coroner's jury won't believe you. I wouldn't believe you. You got to think of somethin' better."

"There isn't anything better. That's the way it happened."

SO THERE was nothing John Green could do but lock Roy Whitfield in the single-celled courthouse jail, down in the basement. He performed this act grimly, distastefully, thinking all the time of what Ginny and Joanne would say.

It was ten o'clock when he returned to his office. He instructed his deputy about Roy's lunch, heard the coroner's report on the bullet that had killed Amos Byers, sat and thought morosely a while, smoked his pipe, and let the clock turn while he postponed seeing the county attorney. But presently it was time for lunch, and he had to face his women. There'd be no postponing that.

Ginny met him at the edge of the honeysuckle-covered porch, her hands folded under her apron, her red hair glistening in the vagrant shafts of sunlight that struck through the heavy foliage. Ginny's face was very sober as she kissed him. He knew

that Ginny had heard. Which meant that Joanne had also heard.

Ginny whispered, "Joanne's in her room. Crying, John. Leave her alone for now."

Lunch was boiled potatoes, ham, sliced tomatoes, iced tea, cold apple pie. Mild foods that went down without hurting his throat, which still gave him trouble twenty-five years after he had been shot in the neck in one of his stand-up gunfights. Ginny sat opposite him without eating, her eyes on his face.

Ginny said, when he finished his pie, "All right, John. How does it look?"

"You know," John said complainingly, "I ain't supposed to talk about them things, Ginny."

Ginny got to her feet and came around behind him and pulled his ear. She was a surprisingly slender woman for her age. John supposed her weight was not five pounds different from the day they'd married. Grinning, he reached around and pinched her. She giggled, slapped him gently on the shoulder. Then John told her. When he had finished, Ginny said, "Joanne's taking it hard. She loves that boy."

John grunted, nodding as he stuffed his pipe. "I kind of think they had an understanding. By fall, the boy'd have had some real money saved. The Burton place is for sale. Cheap enough, too, considering. That'd have been nice, Ginny. Having her so close."

They exchanged glances, reading each other's thoughts effortlessly. As if by common consent they glanced away, and John said angrily:

"But damn it, Ginny, it's my job. I've sworn to uphold the law, and that means against anybody. Against you, if you committed a crime. It ain't my job to prove the boy's innocent."

"It's your job to find out the facts," Ginny said.

"And if I find 'em," John grunted, "and they don't look so good? Ginny, do you

realize what this means? The whole town knows about Joanne and Roy. If I help him, I'm obstructing justice for my daughter's sake. If I work against him, people'll say I never liked him, that I used this chance to get him out of the way. They'll say I'm too cold-blooded to hold public office. Either way, this will finish me as sheriff of Sago County."

Ginny said with certainty, "You're not thinking of that, though."

"All right, damn it, I'm not." John stared at her bleakly. "Ginny, I'm thinking of the boy. Is he a murderer or not? He was cool, Ginny. So goldanged cool it scares me!"

"John, you're a fool." She touched his arm with a sudden tenderness, the kind of tenderness she reserved for very special times. "Look, John," she said, "I've understood your notions for twenty years. The facts look bad for Roy, and you believe them. You should know better. That boy's no murderer. He's a good boy. You start by believing he's a good boy—then you go looking for facts."

IN SPITE of himself, John grinned. "That ain't exactly the way it's done. But you've got a point. Hell, Ginny, it ain't the plain killing, you know that. I've killed, myself, when I had to."

"And there isn't a gentler and finer man in Sago County," Ginny said. Ginny's eyes were shining faintly. "The way you feel now shows it. Go back to the office, John. Do your job the best you can and don't worry about the voters or your conscience. Both of them will do the right thing, without any help from you."

John said, "Joanne?"

"There's times," Ginny said, "when you've got to be cruel-hearted toward your children. Like teeth-pulling and vaccinations. I'll handle Joanne, John. I think I'll send her to Guthrie to visit Aunt Mona. Go on. You're smelling up my curtains with that old pipe."

John grinned again, for Ginny had never before complained about her curtains in twenty years of married life. He went back to his office feeling inexplicably more cheerful. Ginny's magic, that. He eased himself comfortably into his swivel chair and waited for the county attorney.

The county attorney heard about it from the coroner, as John had guessed he would. The county attorney came storming into John's office and demanded why he hadn't been informed of this. And what had John done about collecting evidence, if anything? And didn't John realize that Roy Whitfield would have to be charged within twenty-four hours, and they had to have something to charge him with?

The county attorney was a little fat man named Meers. Very dignified. Very important. He looked like a senator and talked like a senator; it was John Green's unhappy belief that someday Meers would be a senator.

John said, "I've arranged for a coroner's inquest tomorrow, Meers. Sit down and I can tell you all the evidence in two minutes."

When he'd heard the evidence, Meers became visibly excited. "A perfect case, John! The boy's story is preposterous, of course. It's time the lawlessness in that territory was smashed. This'll make history in Sago County."

John Green said drily, "What lawlessness you referring to, Meers?"

Meers flushed. "All right, a politician's apt to get too enthusiastic. But look, John. Amos Byers was an important man, a big man. Who's this Roy Whitfield? Who does he know? Answer me that, John!"

"He knows me," John said. "Meers, I will not be a party to crucifying this boy for the sake of a few stinking votes. To tell the truth, I don't think he's guilty."

"It's not your job to decide whether he's guilty," Meers snapped. "It's your job to gather evidence and make any arrests warranted by that evidence. All right. You've

done it. You've done better than I thought. Look, John. Get out of the case. Let me handle it."

John said very quietly, "Meers, I understand you too well. I will not do that. You can start what rumors you wish. You can support an opposition candidate to me in next month's election. I don't care a damn. I am going to give this boy what help I can."

And so at two o'clock, John Green went into the basement jail. He was very serious now. Roy Whitfield was nervously smoking cigarettes on the steel cot of the cell.

A few hours here had given Roy a haggard look. John let himself into the cell and said soberly:

"Now, Roy, we've got some work to do. I want you to think. Remember everything you know about Amos Byers. Every time you spoke to him, or about him." He hesitated, seeing the puzzlement in Roy's eyes. "You see, Roy, I'm taking it for granted you're telling the truth. That there *was* something wrong with Amos. If Amos was trying to kill you, we've got to find out why."

IT WAS the kind of job John Green hated, because it was slow and trying and fruitless work. But somewhere, John knew—somewhere in the relationship of Roy Whitfield and Amos Byers—lay the clue to this killing. Roy himself did not know what that clue was. So it was up to John to drag it out.

By three o'clock, John knew that Roy Whitfield's father had once sold a milk cow to Amos, that Amos patted Roy on the head and called him a strapping boy. That Amos' wife, long dead now, had given Roy an all day sucker once. That Roy had tried to get a job with Amos, three years ago, and been turned down because Amos didn't need a hand.

None of it helped. It was just the normal relationship of any two men living in a

sparsely settled cow country. It was four o'clock before Roy mentioned the hay meadow.

"I hired an old timer named Crabtree," Roy said, "to mow for my baling crew. He's got a team and a five-foot mower. I paid him fifty cents an acre, him furnishing the team and his own lunches. Well, there was a little argument about the acreage of that meadow we were baling this morning."

John Green said wearily, "I don't see how that can mean anything, Roy. But go ahead. What happened?"

"Old Crabtree," Roy said, "claimed that meadow was something better'n fifteen acres. Claimed I owed him seven and a half for mowing it. But Amos said it was a ten-acre meadow. Said he'd bossed the survey thirty years ago."

"Did you check up?"

"Yeah. I came in to the courthouse last night to look up the county records, but they didn't show the acreage of that meadow. They did show it was in the southeast corner of a forty, though. So this morning I went out with an old surveyor's chain of Dad's. I found the corner stake, and I made a rough check of that meadow. It was pretty rough, because there's some curves in the meadow. But Sheriff, I think that meadow is better'n ten acres!"

"I don't get it," John Green said, but at the same time he was casting his mind back to some things that had happened thirty years ago, when he'd been a young cowhand himself in this country, and he did begin to get it. He leaned forward, and a bubble of excitement began to swell in his old throat injury. He said hoarsely:

"Wait a minute, Roy. Maybe your old man Crabtree was right. He ought to know just how many acres he can mow in a day."

"That's what *he* said. He said he could mow two acres an hour, sometimes more if it was easy cutting. It took him from

dew-off to five yesterday afternoon to cut that meadow."

"You sure of that?"

"I was there. Settin' up the baler. Makin' a batch of new head blocks. One thing and another."

John said, "Roy, how fast does a mower run?"

"Four miles an hour. That's the walking speed of an average team. Take it day in and day out, that's the way it figures, according to the manufacturers. Why?"

John got to his feet. "Roy, sometimes an old timer like me remembers things he hasn't thought of for years. Listen, son. You sit tight and stick to the truth. I got an idea."

Back in his office he dug out pencil and paper and rummaged in his desk till he found an old almanac. He found that there were 43,560 square feet in an acre, and 5,280 feet in a mile. He multiplied, concentrating grimly. Four times 5,280 times five, divided by 43,560. He came out with 2.4 plus. He checked his figures, and then he leaned back in his chair and stuffed his pipe with fingers that trembled in excitement. Old man Crabtree had been right.

The old man *could* mow two acres an hour, even allowing for turns, and for time out to grease and oil the mower. He had put in time enough to mow more than fifteen acres. Yet Amos Byers had claimed the meadow was only ten acres.

John thought, *Is there a motive here for murder?* And he knew there was, somehow, although he could not see it yet. His job now was to uncover that motive. And now he had something to work on.

HE CROSSSED the street to old man Thales' office. Thales had been Amos Byers' lawyer for thirty years. Thales had no objection to showing the abstract on Byers' ranchland.

The abstract showed that the original survey of the property was made by the surveying firm of Welch and Tomlinson.

Byers had purchased the land from the Sago Indian Agency on the basis of that survey, at four dollars per acre. The boundaries of the land were clearly defined in terms of landmarks, roads, blazed trees, creeks and rivers. The contract, which Byers had made with the agency specifically stated that in the event of an error in the survey, the landmarks were nevertheless to determine the boundaries of the ranch.

John said, "Mr. Thales, you're an old-timer here. What ever happened to that surveying firm?"

"Welch disappeared, early in the survey," Thales ran a hand through his white hair, remembering. "I believe there was some talk of a warrant for him from the federal marshal's office in Fort Smith. Tomlinson finished the survey, then moved to Wichita and bought an interest in a mercantile. Far as I know, he's still there. Why, Sheriff?"

"Just digging. Thanks, Mr. Thales."

John went home. When something puzzled him, when he was at the end of his rope, he always talked it out with Ginny. Sometimes the talking helped to focus his mind on the problem. More often, Ginny had one of her intuitive flashes that went straight to the heart of the truth.

In the kitchen Ginny was drawing a sheet of cookies from the oven. Ginny took one look at him, then silently shoveled the cookies onto a plate with a spatula. She set the plate of warm cookies on the table, placed a pitcher of iced tea and an empty glass beside it, and gestured toward the chair. John smiled wearily at her and obeyed the silent order. The cookies were pungent with some exotic spice he didn't recognize. The tea was cool. Ginny sat opposite him at the table and nibbled at a cookie. John said:

"Suppose I wanted to buy some land, Ginny. Unsurveyed land. Land that I had fenced when the graze was free."

Ginny smiled. "All right, John."

"Suppose I made a deal to buy the land at four dollars an acre. Only nobody knew how many acres this land contained. Suppose I hired a surveying crew. Suppose I bribed the surveyor to make a mistake—in my favor."

"You'd stand to save a lot of money," Ginny said, "if it was as big a ranch as Amos Byers'. Maybe thousands of dollars."

"Money on the purchase price. More money on taxes. I'd know the survey would be corrected eventually, but I could sew that up in the contract. I could describe the land in terms of boundaries rather than acres. But, Ginny, there's something else. There were *two* surveyors. Welch and Tomlinson."

Ginny said, "And Welch disappeared."

John stared at her, amazed, with a cookie halfway to his mouth. "How'd you know that? You was a sprig of a girl then, down in Texas."

"John Green, don't be silly. I have lived in this town twenty years. Do you think there is anything about it or its people I haven't found out?"

John grinned, and it occurred to him again that you could never know a woman. Twenty years he had lived with Ginny, and she could still surprise him, still show him something bright and new and amazing about herself. He walked around and pecked her lightly on the cheek, then sat down again. "What about Tomlinson?"

"Jessica Samuels knew Tomlinson. She ran across him in Caldwell, last year. He's running a saloon there. The Jayhawker. Jessica said he went to Wichita when he left here. Bought into a mercantile. But he moved to Caldwell. Jessica said he was still single, and quite good-looking, in a saloonish sort of way. Jessica said—"

"That's enough. It'll take all day to tell what Jessica said." John smiled at Ginny, and then the smile went away as he thought of what he had to do. He got to his feet and began to unbutton his shirt.

"Heat some water so I can wash up, Ginny. I've got to catch the northbound for Caldwell."

HE STEPPED down off the train in Caldwell at midnight. He had very little time, because the coroner's inquest was set for ten o'clock next morning. He moved up the darkened streets of the strange town, feeling very grim.

After inquiry, he found the sheriff's house and routed his brother officer out of bed. He made his explanation and got what he wanted, a special deputy's commission. Then he walked two blocks south to Main Street, and into the brightly lit Jayhawker Saloon.

Tomlinson was a strapping man of fifty-five, and as Jessica had said; he was good-looking in a saloonish way. He had graying hair, cut short, and a heavy nose, and well-tailored clothes. John crossed the floor, put his foot on the rung of Tomlinson's chair, and introduced himself.

"I want," John said, "a look at your books, Mr. Tomlinson."

Tomlinson became very nervous. "A sudden dirty pallor swept his heavy face.

"Naturally, I'm always anxious to cooperate with the law. It might help if you'd tell me what you're after, Sheriff. Maybe I can remember . . ."

"Maybe you can," John said gently. "Tomlinson, when two men act together in a murder, they become afraid of each other. Each man tries to keep some proof of the other's guilt, to protect himself. What I'm after is proof that you and Amos Byers killed a surveyor named Welch, thirty years ago. And that Byers paid you to make an erroneous survey. You got any such proof in your books?"

And immediately John sensed that he was right, that Tomlinson *did* have such proof, for the saloonman's dirty pallor went dead white. Tomlinson bit at his lips, like a squirrel. And then John knew

with a queer kind of instinct that Tomlinson was going to do something foolish, and he tried to stop it, but too late. Tomlinson swung up his arm; John saw the sleeve derringer drop out of its fastening against Tomlinson's arm and into Tomlinson's fist. And John had to make a very fast draw.

Tomlinson got off his shot. The bullet entered John's shoulder, just furrowing under the skin and missing the bone cleanly. Not a serious shot at all, but unfortunate, in a way. Because the force of the bullet jarred John's arm, and instead of shooting Tomlinson through the leg as he'd intended, John shot him through the stomach. . . .

The southbound left Caldwell at 3:28 a.m. John managed to catch it by inches.

The thing was simple enough, when you knew the answer. Surveyor Welch had been an honest man. He'd tried to inform the law when Amos Byers had offered him a bribe to make the erroneous survey. Byers and Tomlinson had killed him, then started the rumor that he'd fled before a marshal's warrant. Tomlinson had completed the erroneous survey. For thirty years the crime had gone unsuspected, and it would have still been unsuspected if Amos Byers had not got jittery when Roy Whitfield questioned the acreage of his hay meadow.

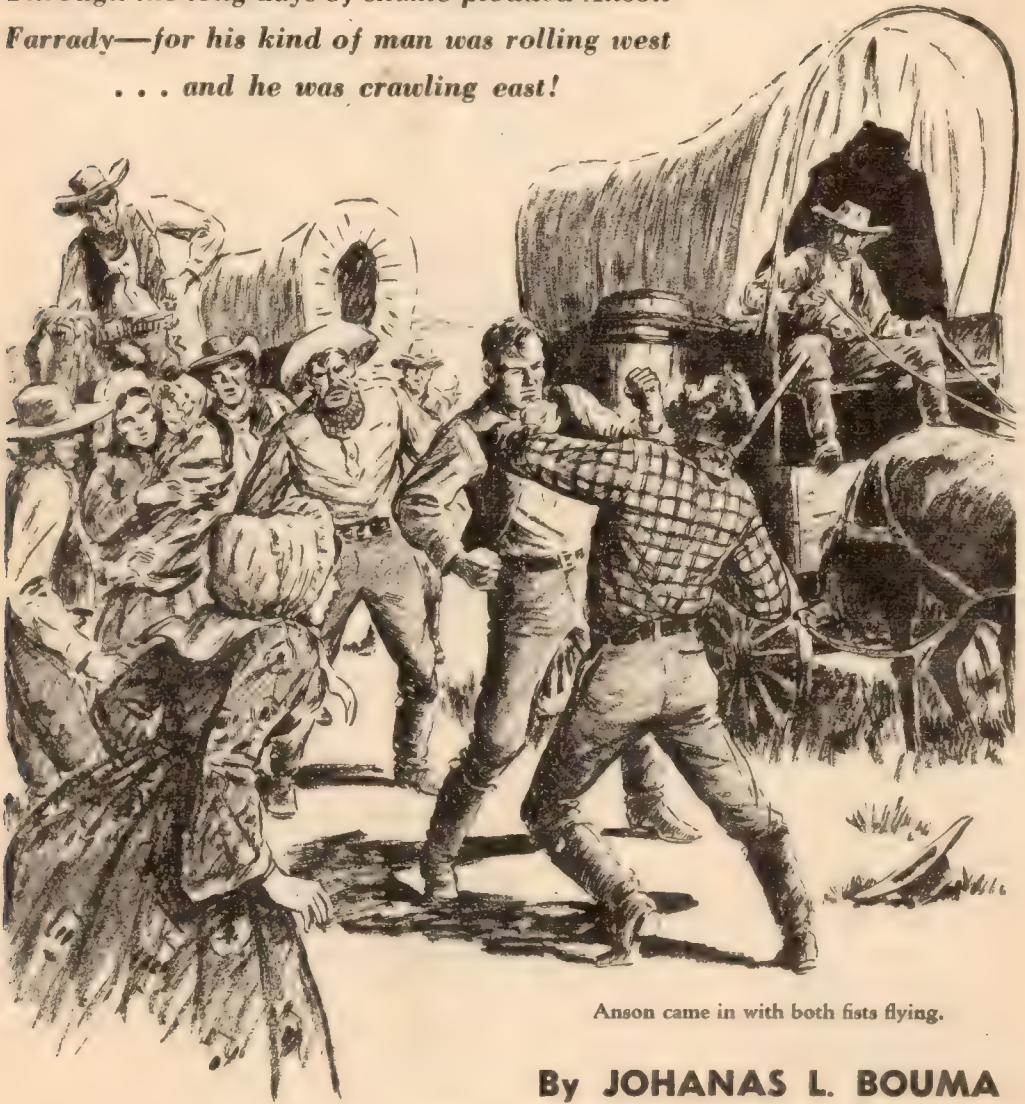
Amos had tried to seal Roy's mouth on a trumped-up charge, and Amos had been killed himself.

John Green settled into the leather seat with a contented sigh. Ginny would be pleased.

That was the important thing, John thought, and now for the first time he allowed himself the luxury of a satisfied grin. Of course it was good that he'd been able to help Roy. And Joanne. But best of all, he had remained honest with his job, and with himself. It took a woman like Ginny to understand that.

QUITTER TRAIL

*Through the long days of shame plodded Anson
Farrady—for his kind of man was rolling west
... and he was crawling east!*



Anson came in with both fists flying.

By JOHANAS L. BOUMA

TO QUIT and turn back with the goal almost in sight takes the heart out of a man. That's what it had done to Anson Farrady. He walked beside his oxen, a dull and hopeless look on his long, tanned face.

Anson's rig was fourth in a column of

twenty wagons, heading east. Soda Springs lay two days' travel behind them, and they were loaded to the canvas with household goods, with farm tools and a plow that would never turn Oregon's virgin soil. It seemed a shameful thing to Anson to be rolling away from the lowering sun when

they'd bravely faced it for so long a time.

In the wagon Anson's wife, Susan, hushed the Baldwin baby's crying. Agnes Baldwin was down sick, unable to care for her young one, and not caring much, either, Anson reflected. The Baldwins were a shiftless lot at best. But at least they'd been to Oregon, a place Anson could not hope to see now.

Susan Farrady was having words with her mother about the baby. Anson, who had never been able to think of Mrs. Jameson with that term of affection, looked sourly at the Jameson wagon behind his. Jed Jameson was slouched on the box, asleep as usual. This nettled Anson. It wasn't right for a man to sleep with the sun still shining.

His mother-in-law looked out the open hood. She was a big woman with sharp eyes, grimly proud. Anson wished she'd stay in her own wagon, instead of always hanging around his wife. It had been Mrs. Jameson's talk, for the most part, that had made Susan want to turn back.

Mrs. Jameson said, her voice irritable, "Anson, why don't you walk on the shady side of the wagon?"

"Oh, Mother, leave him alone," Susan said.

"Just look at his face! A man full grown, and fighting like a drunken Injun."

Anson spat in disgust. He knuckled the bristles on his square jaw and then let his fingers explore the tender swelling below his right eye. He touched his torn ear gingerly. He'd been whipped for sure, and by a man only a mite bigger than himself. The thought made him squirm.

Last evening they had made camp within shouting distance of a westbound train. It had been a time for a hoedown and the twanging of banjos, but the desire to gather in neighborly fashion was missing. Anson had understood why, for it had been the resolute meeting the defeated, and shame swept over those facing east when they met the westering emigrants. Hardships,

doubts and fears had broken them, and only the need for protection held them together now. Once they left Indian country behind they would scatter, each wagon taking its share of shame back from where it had come.

The burly blacksmith from the westbound train had voiced opinions bordering on insult, and Anson had sailed into him. But his heart hadn't been in it, and he'd tasted dust without landing a blow.

Susan's voice pulled him around. "Anson, help me down. I think I'll walk a bit."

As he reached up and swung her down into the dusty trail beside him, he was remembering the way she'd looked when he'd courted her four years ago. She'd been a school teacher, with a face pale as cream and laughter deep in her dark eyes. But sun and wind had darkened her, and the long, useless trek and her mother's nagging had dampened her eagerness.

She fanned the air in front of her face. "Dust. Nothing but dust the whole day long. No wonder people get sick." She gave him a sharp, sidelong glance. "You'd better let me bandage that ear tonight."

"It's healing." He'd be danged if he'd wear a bandage around his head. "What's the matter with the Baldwin's baby?"

"Nothing. He's a good baby. If Mother—" She broke off, looking ahead, her voice sharp again. "It's about time we camped for the night. Burton always waits till dark, and then nothing gets done."

She was beginning to sound like her mother, Anson thought. It hadn't been like this when they were first married, when they had their farm, their own friends and neighbors. Then their baby was born and Mrs. Jameson came, as she stated with grim satisfaction, "to help you in your time of need." Susan's all but useless stepfather tagged along, and though Anson considered it right nice of them at the time, he thought differently when they stayed after the baby died. He'd had them around his neck ever since.

Anson stopped to let the wagon roll past, and untied his mare from the tailboard. He didn't bother to saddle, but jumped on bareback. "I'll look in on the Baldwins," he said.

Susan shook her head, showing quick alarm. "No, Anson! You stay away from them. Mr. Burton said we have to be careful. We can't be sure what the sickness is, and if it spreads—"

"Burton's an old woman, afraid of what ain't there," Anson interrupted.

"Then just say the baby's all right. Don't go near Agnes. Just say it and ask after her."

From the wagon, her mother called, "Where's he off to now?"

"Oh, Mother, be quiet!"

ANSON rode at a walk toward the tail of the train, feeling as useless as his father-in-law asleep on the wagon box. A man only came alive when there was something to work for. They'd all had a touch of that spirit at the beginning, even Jed, who usually needed a fire under him to get him moving. Anson hadn't wanted his in-laws along in the first place, and he'd never been quite sure how it happened. But there they were, all four of them together. They had come all the way out here, a thousand miles or more, and every turn of the wheel had brightened Anson's spirits. But Mrs. Jameson's early enthusiasm had gone flat as the days passed. Little by little the spirit had left her, and Susan's had died with it. It was like a sickness spreading, Anson thought, this fear of the unknown, of the danger and cruelty that might be out there.

The fork in the Platte was where his mother-in-law had first suggested turning back. Anson had ignored her, but she'd kept after him and Susan all the way to Soda Springs, where the California trail branched off. Day after day she'd measured the frightening frontier against the secure world they had left behind, a world

where the sun shone and the snow fell in its proper time, a world in which they had lived without any reason for fear.

They had made a long stop at Fort Hall. There'd been other half-hearted crowding the flats there, including the Baldwins, who had found Oregon more than they could bear. Each wagon train brought its quota of irresolute. Angry and pleading in turn, Susan had talked to him. She didn't want to go on. That was what hurt: he was leading her and she was afraid.

A man named Burton was leading a party back. Anson reckoned he'd never forget what it had cost him to go along.

So now his wife should be happy, he thought, and not sharp-spoken about everything that didn't suit her fancy.

He sighed heavily and scanned the surrounding country. The land rose and fell gently to the distant mountain skyline in the west, where the sun lowered in a splash of color. Purple pockets spread and darkened the land, and Anson's chest tightened. He shut his mind to it and reined up alongside the last wagon.

A thin, bearded man with hollow eyes looked down at him from the high seat. "Think we'll ever get there?"

"Depends on where you're going."

Ben Baldwin yawned. "Don't make much difference, I reckon. Oregon, she ain't worth going to, I'll say that much."

"You said that," Anson said shortly.

"I figure we should've turned off to California. They say there's plenty gold left in that country. Man can dig himself a pile in no time."

"How's Mrs. Baldwin?"

"Oh, I reckon she's all right."

"Your baby's doing fine. My wife says to tell you."

Baldwin spat. "Kids is trouble. You're lucky you ain't got any."

Anson heard moaning from inside the wagon. He slid down and jumped to the box and pulled the hood open to look in on the sick woman. Tattered blankets covered

her, and her eyes had a glazed look. He reached in and put his hand on her forehead; it was hot and dry to the touch.

"She's feverish."

Baldwin rubbed his hand across another yawn. "Man hadn't ought to bring a woman out here. I'd've made it fine if it hadn't been for my woman." He cocked his head. "Feel that wheel?"

Anson had noticed a wobble in the right rear wheel. "Why didn't you fix her at the fort?"

"She was only off a mite, then. Figured she'd last. But I dunno now."

Baldwin's wagon was weathered and worn, and his hippy oxen looked ready to drop. "We'll look over that wheel this evening," Anson said.

"Trouble, trouble," Baldwin muttered. "Ain't one thing it's another."

"Man, get straight with yourself," Anson said harshly.

Baldwin looked surprised, then hurt. "Why, now, I do what I can. Always have."

Anson grunted on a deep breath. He leaped on the mare's back and rode back to his own rig.

THEY made camp as darkness fell. While Anson watered and fed and pegged the mare and oxen, Susan got a fire going and started supper. As usual, her mother bustled around, giving instructions. "Now the fire's big enough, daughter. Here, you're not doing this right. You just sit down and let me handle things," and Susan would sigh and sit in her rocking chair.

Anson finished his chores quickly, and because he needed to keep moving after the long, idle day, he helped Jed with his work.

He ate quickly while Mrs. Jameson's words rolled off his back. She was saying what they would do when they got back to Ohio, and Anson's strong teeth ground together when she said, "Now I know what's best for you children, so—"

He stole a glance at his wife. She was looking into the fire, seemingly a thousand miles away, but when he got up her eyes went to him quickly, and she smiled. "Had enough, Anson?"

"Plenty."

About as much as he could stand, he thought, walking toward Baldwin's wagon. Calling them children! And him twenty-six, and his wife only three years younger.

Burton's voice roused him. The lanky train captain was talking to Baldwin, standing well away from the wagon. Anson noticed then that the other wagons had left Baldwin's rig outside the circle. A few men and women came to stand beside Burton.

Anson came up and said, "What's going on?"

"I just been to see Ben's woman," Burton said, "and she's mighty sick. Better if we stay away from her."

"Ben's got a dished wheel that needs fixing."

"That's his worry, not ours."

"I reckon he needs help," he said, looking around.

Burton shrugged. "That's your business," he said and walked away. The men drifted, muttering, back to their wagons.

Anson looked at the wheel in the faint light. The spokes had shrunk with the heat and were loose in their sockets, and the tire was loose. The hub burr needed tightening. He straightened. "Ben! Where in tarnation are you?"

"Huh?" Ben poked his head from the wagon. "How's she look?"

"You'll have to unload some, so we can prop her up. But get a good fire going first. Where's your tools?"

"Ain't got none, to speak of."

Anson swore. "Get that fire going." He turned to go after his own tools.

Susan was rocking the baby. They made a pretty picture, he thought absently. "Sit with us, Anson," she said.

"I got work to do."

"What work?" It was Mrs. Jameson. He hadn't seen her in the shadows. "Don't tell me you're going to be fool enough to help—"

"Shut up," Anson grated.

"Anson," Susan said sharply, "that's no way to talk to Mother."

"Then let her stay out of my business!"

"When I think of the men my daughter could have married—" his mother-in-law said, but Anson didn't wait to hear the rest. He'd heard it before, had listened with disgust and anger to those same words from that woman who was pulling his wife from him. So he walked quickly away, before he should shove his foot down her throat to shut her up.

Ben Baldwin was just climbing out of his wagon when Anson got there. They built a big fire, and then started to unload the wagon. They left the sick woman inside. Ben said she'd eaten a little. Now she was deep in restless sleep, not even waking when they pried the wagon up to put props under the axletree.

Anson worked steadily. Ben was little help, except to keep feeding the fire. Later he disappeared, and Anson found him under the wagon, asleep.

When the wheel was fixed to his liking, Anson slipped it on and tightened the linch pin. Then he booted Ben awake and together they knocked the props from under and reloaded the wagon. By that time, the night was spent, and Anson was tired.

He carried the tools back to his own wagon and put them inside without disturbing his wife. Then he threw a handful of buffalo chips on the coals, stirred them to blazing and sat back in Susan's rocker. He thought some of smoking his pipe, but while he was thinking about it he fell asleep.

IT SEEMED no time before Susan was shaking him. He was so gravel-eyed with sleep while he yoked his oxen that

he didn't notice the commotion around Baldwin's wagon until Susan called his attention to it. Then he saw the rigs near Baldwin's pulling away in a hurry. Before he got there he heard Burton's scratchy voice.

"That's the way it's gonna be," he was saying. "We can't take the chance of us all coming down sick."

Ben Baldwin was standing, limp and dejected, beside his wagon, his eyes pleading like a lost dog's.

Seeing Anson, Burton took a step back, his face rigid. "Jed's woman's got the plague, and I ain't taking a chance.

Anson cut him off. "Don't say that unless you're sure."

"She's fever-flushed!" Burton shouted, his voice breaking. "I looked in on her! There's pox on her already!"

Anson knew about the dreaded plague, the "Black Death," as the Indians called it. He felt naked panic coming over the crowd around them, felt it himself as he pictured Susan caught in the grip of the deadly sickness.

One woman called shrilly for her children. "You sure it ain't already spread? My kids—"

"I'm leaving here," a man yelled.

"Farraday was with 'em last night," another man said, and Anson swung fiercely and saw the man slinking away.

"Baldwin stays back or I shoot him!" a man shouted.

"That's what I told him," Burton said, and suddenly all the shame and misery and fear that lived in the wagons became anger directed against Ben and Agnes Baldwin. It was at once a release and a goad to movement. In a moment the crowd had scattered.

Anson grabbed Burton's shoulder and spun him around. "You can't leave them here!"

"Keep your hands off me!" The train captain's eyes were shiny with fear. "Better one family than all of us."

"You don't know it's the plague."

"I don't know it isn't, and I ain't waiting to find out."

Susan came and pulled at Anson's arm.

"Don't make things worse than they are."

"They're pretty bad for the Baldwins right now."

"Anson, don't be a fool!" She shook him, her face contorted. "What can you do? Stay with them? Will that help? Oh, Anson, you'll only catch their sickness!"

Some of the wagons were already rolling, he saw. He said, keeping his voice patient, "We've only got Burton's word that it's the plague. And he jumps at shadows and gets everybody else jumping."

"I asked what you propose to do," she said, her face pale beneath the tan.

"Why, I reckon I'll have to help them get back to Fort Hall," he said gently. "There's a doctor there."

"And what about us?"

"They need help, Susan."

"And we don't, I suppose."

"We?" There was an odd sadness in his smile. "I reckon you can do without me for a spell. I'll most likely catch up with you before you reach Laramie."

"You mean it," she said, her voice flat.

He hardly knew what he was saying. "I got to, Susan. You don't understand, but helping each other is part of all this. I ain't good at explaining. It's just something I got to do, because if I don't it'll be more of a waste than it already is."

Abruptly, she dropped her face in her hands and ran sobbing to the wagon.

THE two days that followed were mighty empty without Susan. Anson thought of her constantly as he walked over the endless land beside the lone wagon. Ben wasn't much company, what with his complaining, though it was better after the first day when Agnes' fever broke. It broke suddenly, early that evening, and by morning she was strong enough to bicker with her husband. Anson guessed that those little

pimples Burton had called pox were nothing but heat rash.

What was it in folks that permitted them dislike their own born? Well, not exactly dislike, but just be indifferent to. Ben didn't pay any more attention to the baby than he did to his oxen, and the woman wasn't much better.

Because he wanted to make good time, Anson kept prodding the oxen till long after dark, only stopping to feed and water them. He ignored Ben's grumbling and got rolling again before sunup, so that it was high noon when they sighted the wagons camped around Soda Springs.

The sun was lowering, though, before they got to within hailing distance of the wagons. Then there were questions, of course, but Anson let Ben do all the talking. He felt mighty dull and tired.

He took his mare up to where there was some graze and then spread out his blankets. The Baldwins didn't need his help any longer. They'd more than likely take the short jog to Fort Hall and join another train going east. Anson lay down and went to sleep. . . .

He didn't rightly know how long he slept, but it must have been a good many hours, for the sun had been low in the west when he dropped off, and now it shone bright and steady in the east. He got up and stretched, yawning mightily, feeling suddenly sharply alive. A good night's sleep could do that to a man.

He looked around and saw his mare grazing. A good many wagons had gone from the camp site, and he saw no sign of them down the trail. There was a sound at his back, and when he turned there was the box cradle that Ben had made for his baby.

Now what in tarnation? he asked himself. What had possessed that woman to leave her child there, out in the open. He poked the dirty blanket aside and saw a scrap of paper with writing on it. He squinted at it,

(Continued on page 111)

BORN TO THE

Powerful Cow-Country Novelette

By

CLIFF FARRELL

CHAPTER 1

Gun-Champion of Dragoon

JUST before sundown, as though girding itself for a coming storm, a brood-silence settled over wild Dragoon town, on the Platte River. The sidewalks were deserted, although the saloons were crowded. In the barrooms money was being bet that Duke Buckmaster would kill King Colton, marshal of Dragoon, in the gun-duel that was to take place within the next half hour.

A dozen trail crews were in Dragoon, and these Texas cowboys were offering two to one that Duke Buckmaster would burn down the lawman. Not that they had any admiration for the saturnine, slit-eyed outlaw who was waiting in the Montana Bar with his guns low-strapped in greased holsters.

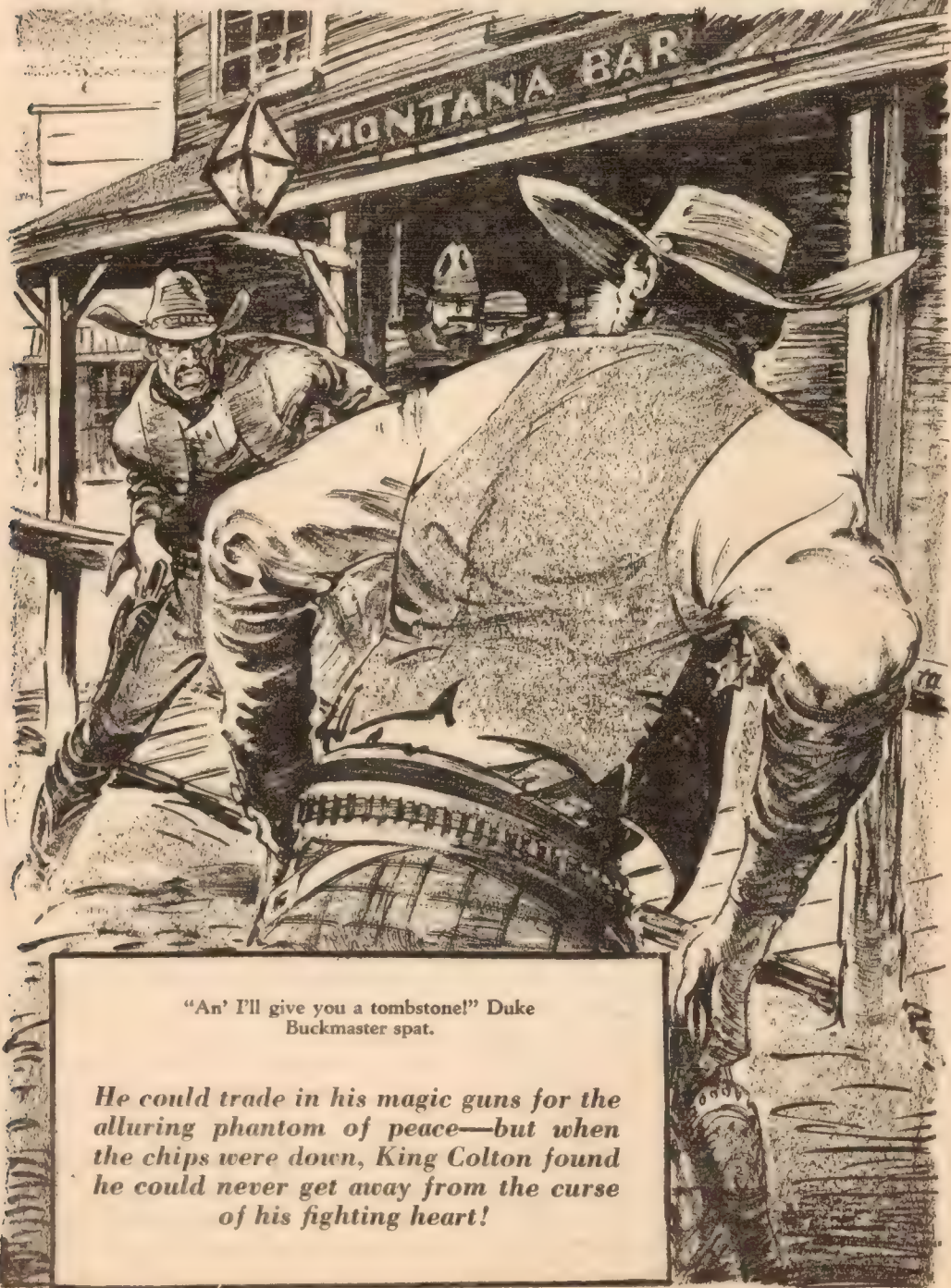
Duke Buckmaster was known as a cold-blooded, merciless killer, and not all of the men he had rubbed out had been given a fighting chance. Next to his older brother, Bat, he was rated as the fastest gunman in the territory.

The cowboys backed Duke Buckmaster partly because of his deadly reputation, and partly because they hated all these northern trail-town marshals as a class. But the odds

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GUNSMOKE CODE



"An' I'll give you a tombstone!" Duke
Buckmaster spat.

*He could trade in his magic guns for the
alluring phantom of peace—but when
the chips were down, King Colton found
he could never get away from the curse
of his fighting heart!*

shortened as sunset approached. Town gamblers and citizens began covering the cowboy money, and asking for more. Pete French, mayor of Dragoon, who also owned the Long Trail saloon, covered a five thousand dollar bet that a Texas herd owner offered at even money, and invited others to step up at the same price.

"Buckmaster's fast," Peté French conceded. "He's knocked over some salty fightin' men. But for my money I'll take King Colton. He's rodded this town for two seasons—a man's job, mister. If you'll walk down to the graveyard you'll see six pine grave-markers set up in a row, bearin' the names of tough men who thought they was faster than King Colton. Any more Texas money burnin' your pockets, gents? I'm coverin' everything you want to put up, includin' pocket watches."

Men haggled over the qualifications of the duelists as they would over the prospects of a quarter horse. Either Duke Buckmaster or King Colton was to die soon out there in the dusty street. They were evenly matched, if the betting odds were to be believed. All told, it was a fascinating sporting proposition.

Impatiently the town watched the weathered Buffalo Hotel up the street where King Colton roomed. Always, at six o'clock to the minute, he came forth to begin his evening tour of duty.

In his sparsely furnished room in the little frame hotel, the man who enforced the law in roaring Dragoon buckled on his gun belt and made sure that his matched brace of cedar-handled .44's slid easily in the hard leather holsters, glossy with harness wax. Admiring citizens had presented these guns to the marshal in the past, and initialed in gold on the handles were the letters K.C. They stood for King Colton, gun-king of a six-shooter empire.

H E WAS thirty years old now. In the days when he had ridden range he had been known only as Lee Colton. That

was his real name, for the title of King was an honorary one. With light blue eyes, lean jaws and straight nose and mouth, he stood an inch under six feet. Once there had been a capacity for much laughter in his mouth and eyes, but two years of toting the badge in Dragoon had frozen most of that out of him.

He pinned the marshal's badge on his clean white shirt, and adjusted his black sleeve-holders, conscious of the strange hush in the town. He had faced that lowering quiet more than once, and he knew what it presaged. Another glory-hunting badman was out there, waiting to test the champion's gun-speed.

This time it was Duke Buckmaster. King Colton had shot one of Buckmaster's outlaw pals a week previously, and Buckmaster had sent word ahead that he was coming to smoke up the lawman. According to Buckmaster, Colton was merely an upstart who had the temerity to interfere with a member of the Buckmaster brothers' wild bunch.

Colton held out his hands and looked at them. His long, supple fingers showed only the slightest quiver of nerve tension. He slanted his hat across his crisp dark hair, and walked down the stairs and through the lobby. A dozen citizens were gathered there to gape at him.

"Good luck, Colton," one said hoarsely, and others chimed in with a mutter of good wishes.

But none offered to follow him or help. They let Colton go out alone into the brooding street where the sunset sky painted the dust an ominous crimson.

The cuckoo clock in Aunt Linda's restaurant was sounding the hour. King Colton was on time to the minute for his tryst with death.

Taut faces stared furtively from doors and windows, and, as he stalked up the street, he felt the imperceptible stir of the town seeming to lean forward to miss no detail of this drama.

A young, veiled woman, who must have alighted from the recently arrived stage, was moving along the sidewalk toward the hotel.

"Get off the street, ma'am," Colton said as he passed. "There'll be bullets flying here in a minute."

A tall, swarthy, black-haired man stepped from the door of the Montana Bar. It was Duke Buckmaster. The gunman moved so as to place the setting sun at his back. Then he became still and quiet, his long legs braced, his hands tensed near his holsters.

Colton did not vary his stride as he came down the sidewalk. At thirty paces he saw Buckmaster's hard face settle, and he knew that the man had made up his mind to go through with it.

Colton said: "You answer the description that fits Duke Buckmaster, mister. You an' your kind are blacklisted in Dragon. We don't cater to killers or trail buzzards here. I'll give you five minutes to pull out of town."

"An' I'll give you a tombstone, Colton," Duke Buckmaster spat. He flipped his guns, slamming the hammers.

Buckmaster was fast—but not as fast as King Colton. A bullet tore through the outlaw's chest as he flashed his draw. His leant body was rocking back from the shock of it as he fired. His first slugs went over King Colton's head. The gunman's muscles went through the function of rocking the hammers and exploding a second brace of shells, but these shots, too, were wild.

Colton fired again, the bullet striking dead center. It sent Buckmaster down. There was the thud of a body hitting the pine sidewalk, and then the writhing sound of violent death.

THE gun echoes died, and the silence moved in again for an instant. Then the town exploded.

Men surged from every door in a mad, whooping tide. The cheering gamblers and

citizens who had bet on the marshal swarmed down on King Colton.

Colton stood looking down at Duke Buckmaster's body, lying crumpled in a widening stain of crimson. Colton's face looked drawn and bloodless. He was barely conscious of the enthusiastic palms that were slapping him on the back.

Mechanically he flipped open the gate on his .44, and punched out the empty shells. They tinkled on the sidewalk, and instantly there was a wild scramble for possession of these souvenirs of death.

Distantly, a thin, mirthless smile on his lips, Colton watched men fight for the empty shells that had taken a man's life. Avid for relics of this duel, more bystanders rushed to where Duke Buckmaster lay and began going through his pockets.

Colton turned away in revulsion. Pete French grabbed his hand, pumping it wildly. "You done it, boy," Pete babbled. "I knew you was too slick for Duke Buckmaster. I bet my shirt on you. I won close to ten thousand dollars when you dropped him."

Colton stared at the fat, bald-headed saloon-keeper. "So you were betting on me to win, Pete?" he said musingly.

"Scraped the bottom of my poke an' took every cent these Tejanos wanted to risk. An' plenty more men in this town won heavy money on you, too, feller. It was a great show!"

"The same as you'd bet on a dog-fight, or on a king-snake matched against a rattler, eh, Pete?" Colton was smiling in a way that made Pete French uneasy.

Without waiting for a reply, Colton pushed past and headed for the hotel, but the hero-worshipping crowd swarmed down on him again. A woman, who was normally a staid housewife, snatched his hat from his head and kept it as a memento. Another woman tore the marshal's badge from his shirt.

Panting, appalled, he escaped to his room. He didn't understand. He held no

hatred for Duke Buckmaster, nor had he any unnecessary remorse for the task that had been thrust upon him. Wiping out the killer had been a grim but inescapable chore.

It was the law that had stamped out Duke Buckmaster—not King Colton. He was merely the weapon the law employed. At least that was the way Colton looked at it. But down there in the saloon bets were being paid off, and brimming glasses were being lifted to acclaim the victor.

A hand tapped the door. It was the veiled young woman he had ordered off the sidewalk as he went to face Buckmaster. The heavy veil over her bonnet concealed her face, and she did not offer to lift it as she entered.

She stood there, calmly surveying him for a moment, then said in a quiet voice, "I want to talk to you, King Colton."

"If it's a souvenir of the killing you're after, ma'am!" Colton snapped, "you've come to the wrong place. I prefer to be left alone."

"This is a business proposition," she said. "I've come a long way to make it. It's a job I thought was in your line."

"What is it?" he asked wearily.

"A gun job. Killing a man, if necessary."

COLTON stared. Then he laughed, dryly and with irony. "A job right in my line, eh? Murder! Something I can handle with ease and skill!"

"You don't understand," she persisted, shaking her head a little at his tone. "This man is worse than Duke Buckmaster, a thousand times over." Her voice showed that she was suddenly near tears. "He has shot down innocent men in cold blood. He's ruining others. He's a greedy, merciless bully, and to save the lives of decent, better men, he's got to be wiped out of existence."

"Why don't some of these hombres who are being ruined take a shot at him?" Colton inquired mockingly.

"They—haven't the courage," she admitted.

"An' so you came here to hire me, 'the Dagoon killer', to do the job that your cowards shun?" he snapped.

"I thought—"

"That I'd jump at the chance to add another notch to my guns?" Colton's lips were gray, his eyes blazing. "You've come to the wrong place, ma'am!"

He held the door wide for her. She hesitated an instant, studying him through her veil. Then she said a surprising thing. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Colton. I—I had misjudged you. Forgive me."

And she went out.

Colton took no part in the wild celebration in Dagoon that night. All drinks were free at Pete French's Long Trail bar, and the town lifted toast after toast to King Colton.

"But Colton will find the goin' tougher when he takes on Duke's brother," a Texas trail man declared as he paid off the bets he had lost.

"This ain't settled yet by a long shot. Bat Buckmaster is plain poison with a smoke-pole, you hear me! I lost my summer's pay an' a hand-tooled Mexican saddle today, backin' Duke. I still got a pair o' Luder boots an' some black bearskin chaps in my warbag that says Bat Buckmaster will punch King Colton's ticket when they meet."

"I'll cover that, puttin' up fifty dollars ag'in the Luders an' the hair chaps," Pete French offered. "You think Bat Buckmaster will take up the grudge?"

"I know damned well he will," the trail man grinned. "Bat was runnin' a faro game in Julesburg when we drove through there three weeks ago. I sent him a telegraph over the railroad wire telling about Duke's bad luck tonight. I got an answer from Bat. He's due in Dagoon on the first train."

It was midnight when Pete French, drunk on his own liquor, awakened Colton to tell him that Bat Buckmaster was en

route to Dagoon to avenge his brother.

"We're backin' you as usual, Colton," Pete grinned.

"Backin' me with what?" Colton asked coldly.

"With every cent we can scrape together, boy. Some of them Tejanos are bettin' that you'll go up a tree before Bat hits town. Me an' others are coverin' every dollar they offer."

After Pete French had gone, Colton sat there on the edge of the bed, rolling a cigarette. He had taken a lot of pride in his marshal's job. As trail towns went, Dagoon was an orderly one. His oath of office had meant something to Colton.

"Matching me against another killer," he spoke aloud, his voice flat and bitter. "Like two pit bulldogs."

He dressed and buckled on his spurs and packed his warbag. He stood a moment looking at the two blue-muzzled, cedar-handled .44's. Then he laid them on the bureau, picked up his warsack and went out. Awakening the night hostler at Slocum's livery, he saddled his black gelding and rode slowly out of Dagoon.

He was quitting—running away from the meeting with Bat Buckmaster. Labeling himself as a man who had turned yellow, and had gone up a tree in the face of danger!

CHAPTER 2

Title to a Coffin

TIME and distance swallowed King Colton. The story of how he had fled from the wrath of Bat Buckmaster, and how jeering cowboys, with Buckmaster as their leader, had shot up Dagoon and spattered yellow paint on every store front and saloon, was told up and down the Montana and Bozeman Trails.

But King Colton himself had dropped out of sight.

It was a year after he had left Dagoon

when Colton rode into the little cowtown of Tamarack in the high country of Colorado. He called himself Lee Thorne now, and wore a trimmed, dark mustache.

He carried around fifteen thousand dollars in his saddle bags, the profits from a lucky coup from copper prospecting in Arizona the previous winter.

He had ridden through this Tamarack country a dozen years in the past, as a tumbleweeding, horizon-hunting young cowboy. It had been virgin range then, a beautiful mountain valley streaked with timber and shadowed by snow-capped peaks. And, because of the peace it had seemed to offer, he had always kept it in mind.

Now, however, Tamarack Valley was no longer uninhabited. He had seen a dozen small spreads along the way, and Tamarack town itself told the story of a newly settled, rich cattle range. In addition to other buildings there were half a dozen stores and four saloons, including an ornate honkatonk called the Crystal Palace.

But it was still a peaceful country, big enough for a man to grow in, remote enough for a man to forget his past.

He strolled the town, and later dropped into the Tamarack bank and talked to the leather-faced, shrewd-eyed president.

"I've got a little money to invest in a ranch," he explained. "I prefer a clear title to a small outfit that has prospects. I figured you'd know if any was on the market."

Bill Dineen, the banker, appraised his visitor keenly. "Stranger around here, are you, Thorne?" he inquired.

"Rode through here as a shorthorn before the range was settled. Liked the country, but wasn't able to drift back this way until today. It's in my mind to settle down here for keeps."

"There's a little outfit on Bucksaw Crick, a dozen miles up the valley, owned by Mrs. Jackman. Sam Jackman died a couple months ago, an' his widow might be of a mind to sell."

The banker paused. "The Jackman graze runs right up against the Forty Bar. That's Larch Lash's outfit."

He was watching Colton sharply from under his lowered brows, but the name of Larch Lash meant nothing to Colton.

Colton asked the banker for directions and thanked him. Bill Dineen sat there watching him walk down the street to saddle up for the ride out to the Jackman ranch. The banker then called a young teller into his office.

"Saddle up, Lonnie, an' bust the breeze out to the Jackman place," he ordered. "Tell the widow that a buyer by the name of Thorne is comin' to talk business with her. Tell her to hold the price at ten thousand—an' to keep her mouth shut."

The young teller looked startled. "Does Thorne know about Larch Lash?"

"I reckon not," Bill Dineen shrugged. "Anyway this range could use a fightin' man on that ranch. God knows we need one. Thorne carries the earmarks of a man who don't scare easy."

The next morning, in Bill Dineen's office, Colton signed the papers that made him owner of the small, deep-grass ranch on Bucksaw Creek. He paid ten thousand dollars for the Rocking Arrow brand, which included some three hundred-odd head of likely white-face stock.

He moved out to the Rocking Arrow the day the Widow Jackman vacated. The house was small, but it was solidly built of squared logs. It stood in a pleasant flat among gnarled oaks. There was a barn, a horse corral, and a branding pen.

Colton stood in front of the house, proud and contented, watching the sun flash on the creek, reveling in the blue haze that sifted between the mountain ridges to the west.

This was the kind of cattle-country a man dreamed about. Now he was a part of it. Dragoon, and all that it had meant, was far behind him—a closed chapter in his book. He had never worn a side-gun

since the evening he killed Duke Buckmaster. He had gone out of his way to avoid trouble since then.

AT THE sound of approaching horses, he turned. He watched three riders ford the stream and jog into the ranch yard. There they drew up, looking him over insolently. Two were sun-swart, hard-mouthed men, packing side guns, and with rifles slung on their saddles. The third, who was plainly their leader, was a deep-chested man of forty, with the thick lips, high cheekbones and straight black hair that spoke of an Indian strain of blood. He wore a checked gingham shirt and a wide-brimmed, tan beaver hat. His leather-faced breeches were thrust into scrolled, silver-spurred boots.

He appraised Colton with hard black eyes. "Where's the Jackman woman, fella?" he demanded curtly.

"If you mean Mrs. Sam Jackman, the widow, she's on her way to Denver by this time," Colton said. "I'm the new owner."

"Owner?" The man snapped the word. He leaped angrily from the saddle and glared at Colton. "How come?"

"I don't recollect askin' you to cool your saddle, mister," Colton pointed out. "It's customary to await an invitation before steppin' down at another man's house. I'm Lee Thorne, in case you're curious. I bought the Rocking Arrow from Mrs. Jackman."

"An' I'm Larch Lash of the Forty Bar." He seemed to expect Colton to quail at the mention of his name. "I aimed to buy this two-bit spread. Maybe you didn't know that?"

"Nor do I give a damn," Colton returned coldly. "I paid a fair price, and I'm satisfied with my bargain."

"Then I'll make you the same offer I made that fool woman," Larch Lash snapped. "Three thousand dollars—cash."

"Three thousand?" Colton laughed coldly. "I paid ten thousand for this spread,

Lash, and I don't mind saying I consider it cheap at the price."

"You're either a fool or a stranger in this country," Lash said, smiling icily. "This side-hill outfit ain't worth three thousand to anybody except me. I'll give you forty-eight hours to make up your mind to sell to me, Horn."

"Thorne is the name, Lash—Lee Thorne. And you've got my answer now. This spread isn't for sale."

Larch Lash mounted. "Maybe you'll think different before the time is up, fella. It looks to me like you've been played for a sucker. I don't stand for any shoestring ranchers within rustling reach of my Forty Bar. I've lost too many cattle to men like you in the past. Three thousand is the price—today. If I don't hear from you soon, I'll whittle the price some. Maybe I'll include a coffin with the offer. Think it over, fella."

Lash and his men rode jauntily away. Colton was grim and frowning. The timbered valley had suddenly lost its peaceful aspect.

"And how do you like those for potatoes, mister?" a mocking voice said behind him.

Colton whirled. At the corner of the house stood a young woman. Long-limbed, firm-breasted, she wore a linen riding skirt, a flannel shirt open at the throat, and spurred boots.

"I'm Carla Daley, the old-maid daughter of Zeke Daley of the Seven Cross," she explained. "I didn't like your visitors so I stayed in the background, but I heard the neighborly welcome you got from Larch Lash. So Bill Dineen and the Widow Jackman found a sucker to buy the Rocking Arrow? You bought a pig in a poke, stranger. You've heard the old saying 'Let the buyer beware.' *Caveat emptor* is the way the Romans used to say it, unless I've slipped up on my book learning since they turned me out of school. But you get my meaning."

SOMETHING in Carla Daley's throaty voice struck a vague recollection in Colton's mind, but he could not place her. She was, he guessed, about twenty-five, and with her gray-green eyes, and brown hair imprisoned under a scarf in gypsy-fashion, she was not what Colton would call beautiful. Yet there was an attraction about her that interested him.

She was appraising him keenly. "I didn't catch the name you gave them," she remarked. "Was it Horn?"

"Thorne," Colton corrected. "Lee Thorne."

"I wonder . . . will you fight or cave?" she mused.

That nettled Colton. "They must have been hoorawing me," he snapped. "That buzzard-beaked gent didn't really mean—"

"He meant it," she corrected. "Larch Lash was born without a sense of humor. The last time he blew himself to a good, hearty laugh was the day Sam Jackman was found dead alongside the Forty Bar line fence, shot in the back. That was what made Mrs. Jackman a widow, and induced her to sell and get out of this country."

"So Jackman was murdered?" Colton's eyes had narrowed.

"Not according to our red-nosed, whiskey-soaked sheriff, Nick Larkin. The sheriff called it suicide. But a man can't shoot himself twice in the back with his own gun. Though Nick Larkin was right, in a way. It's a form of suicide to buck Larch Lash. More than one small rancher has learned that in the past couple of years."

"In other words you're advising me to sell out to Lash—or else?" Colton challenged.

"That's for you to decide, Thorne. A dozen or more men have already sold out for a song to Lash and left the Tamarack country. A few others are still hanging on. This range was once a sort of paradise for small ranchers, but Larch Lash changed that. His Forty Bar already covers half the valley, and he aims to own the rest of

it. He's a gambler by profession, a killer by instinct, and a grass-hog by choice. He owns the Crystal Bar honkatonk in town, and that's the real headquarters of the Forty Bar. He owns the sheriff. Men like you are shouldered off the sidewalk when you go to town to buy bacon and beans. If you try to put up a fight you find yourself matched against paid gunmen. It's always open season on stubborn cowmen in the Tamarack country."

Colton laughed bitterly. "I didn't savvy that a coffin went along with title to this spread."

Carla Daley wore a peculiar, challenging smile. "So you don't intend to fight," she murmured. "Well, I can't blame you."

Colton flushed. "I'm no fighting man," he asserted. "That's out of my line."

"Then this is no place for you," she agreed. "Bat Buckmaster and that gun crew he bosses at the Forty Bar play for keeps."

"Bat Buckmaster?" The question was jerked out of Colton.

She was walking toward her horse which she had left back of the wagon shed. "Bat Buckmaster, the well-known killer, is Larch Lash's top gunman," she explained. "I can see that Buckmaster's name sends chills up and down your backbone, Thorne. He's the man who ran King Colton, the famous gun-marshal of Dragoon, into hiding a year or so ago. Lash imported Buckmaster right after that exploit, and he's been riding gunboss on this range ever since."

Silently Colton watched her ride away.

CHAPTER 3

Bushwhack Vote

AT MIDNIGHT that night rifles opened up on the little log ranch house in which Colton lay asleep. There must have been more than a dozen men firing from the brush and timber.

Colton chanced a few return shots at the flashes from gun muzzles, but the storm of lead that beat on the house at last forced him to lie flat until it subsided. They kept it up for fifteen minutes. Then at a gruff command they retreated and he heard them ride away.

They had made no serious attempt to kill him. The shooting was intended more as a contemptuous warning. All the windows were shot out of the house. Broken crockery littered the kitchen floor, and the cast iron cook stove had broken apart, filling the place with ashes and soot. Chairs and tables were splintered and split by bullets.

Colton cleaned up the mess in the morning, and rode to town. He inquired for Nick Larkin at the sheriff's office, but was directed to Larch Lash's Crystal Palace Bar.

In there, he found Sheriff Nick Larkin, flipping dice with a wide-shouldered, saturnine man at a rear table. Larkin was about as Carla Daley had described him—a flabby man, with a blue-veined bulbous nose and a yellowish bald head.

He looked up with little bloodshot eyes as Colton moved to the table. "I'm Lee Thorne, the new owner of the Rocking Arrow," Colton said. "A bunch of riders shot hell out of my shack last night. I'll sign a warrant against 'em as soon as you round 'em up."

Nick Larkin winked at his companion. "Got any idea who they were, mister?" he yawned.

"A gent who called himself Larch Lash of the Forty Bar made some threats against me yesterday afternoon," Colton said quietly. "And these bullet-throwers left a trail a blind man could follow. They headed toward the Forty Bar. I made sure of that before riding in to make a complaint."

Nick Larkin turned to the big, thin-lipped man at his side. "Was any of you boys shootin' up ranch houses last night, Bat?"

"Nary a one, sheriff," the man grinned coldly. "I tucked 'em into their trundle beds after sundown, an' sung a cradle song until they was snoozin' like innocent little shavers. Thorne must have had a bad dream last night."

"You heard that, didn't you, Thorne?" the sheriff drawled with a detached air. "Bat Buckmaster is range boss of the Forty Bar. I reckon you've made a mistake."

Bat Buckmaster's eyes showed no sign of recognition as he stared at Colton. This was the first time they had met face to face, and the gunman did not suspect that Lee Thorne and King Colton were one and the same.

Buckmaster's hand was toying significantly with the handle of his gun. "I see you don't pack a gun," he sneered. "The next time you got anything to say about the Forty Bar, be primed to back it up with something heavier than talk."

"A man who primes for trouble usually finds it, Buckmaster," Colton remarked. He eyed the nickel-plated star that was pinned on Nick Larkin's vest. "Better polish up your buzzer, sheriff," he added casually. "It's gettin' tarnished. A law badge should always be kept clean and bright."

A black scowl rushed into Bat Buckmaster's face. He half-rose from his chair, but Colton turned his back, and strolled out of the saloon.

Buckmaster subsided. "Yaller!" he spat, just loud enough for Colton to hear.

Swift anger swept through Colton, but he shrugged and went on outside. He had put all that behind him the night he left his guns lying in that hotel room in Dragoon. There was no profit in gun-fighting. That lesson had been branded into him too deeply to be forgotten now.

Bitterly he resented the way fate had pitchforked him into this range war. He stood there on the sidewalk, thinking dismally. He could sell out to Lash, take the loss and pull out of this range unscarred

and alive. Why should he stay here and become involved in the battles that other men had refused to fight?

HIS contempt for the Tamarack people who had refused to meet the issue with Lash increased as he looked at the town. The fall election for the office of county sheriff was less than a week away. Freshly painted canvas banners flapped overhead, and there were big posters and placards in every store window proclaiming Nick Larkin's candidacy for re-election as sheriff.

Here and there were a few small, cheaply printed posters announcing that Zeke Daley was also running for sheriff. He remembered that the gray-eyed Carla Daley had mentioned that this man was her father. Most of Zeke Daley's campaign posters had been torn down or smeared with mud. As Colton stood there watching, two husky, swaggering punchers on Forty Bar ponies rode past and squirted tobacco juice on a poster that bore Zeke Daley's picture.

The two Forty Bar men dismounted in front of a saloon. Hitching up their belts, they strolled along the sidewalk, shouldering citizens out of their way.

Men scowled, but offered no protest. Larch Lash was playing the game according to a rule that was as old as time. He hired tough men to bully and drive fear into the hearts of the opposition.

These two Forty Bar riders had accompanied Lash on his visit to Colton's ranch the previous day. They sighted Colton and, nudging each other, they quickened their stride, intending to shoulder him off the plank sidewalk into the dusty street.

But Colton did not move. At the instant when the bigger of the two would have collided with him, his fist shot out in a short, twisting punch to the base of the jaw. The trouble-hunting gunman staggered back, fell off the sidewalk and slapped the dust of the street with his shoulder blades.

His companion uttered a startled oath and went for his gun. Colton smashed him

in the face before he could bring the gun clear. He followed the reeling man, measuring him coldly, and drove a finishing punch that sent his quarry crashing to the boardwalk.

Colton looked at the two dazed, bleeding gunmen. He blew on his knuckles, then walked to his horse, mounted and rode down the street.

Startled citizens were staring at him. Bat Buckmaster and Larch Lash came hurrying from the Crystal Palace as he rode past. They glared, puzzled, at the two riders, who were struggling to their feet.

Then, without a backward glance, Colton rode on out of Tamarack. But his cold, impassive expression did not indicate his inner turmoil. He was remembering his stern resolve to avoid trouble at all costs. He cursed himself bitterly for the fool play he'd made back there. "Won't you ever learn?" he groaned.

He heard a fast rider behind him, and turned. It was a slim, oval-faced girl of about nineteen. She was mounted on a creamy-maned paint horse, and wearing a short divided skirt and white silk waist. Her lustrous dark hair curled from under her hat-brim. She was worth looking at as she drew up beside him.

"I saw you whip those two toughs," she blurted out. "And I want to express my thanks and appreciation. Keep up the good work, Lee Thorne."

She extended a shapely little hand. "I'm Delight Daley of the Seven Cross," she explained. "Carla, my sister, told of meeting you yesterday. That's why I knew your name."

Colton was still holding her hand.

"It's high time that a man came along who will fight!" she breathed.

Then three more riders overtook them.

One was Carla Daley, and Colton saw the mocking light in her gray-green eyes. "For a man who claims fighting is out of his line, you do pretty well for a beginner, Lee Thorne," she smiled. "Those two For-

ty Bar gunhands are still spilling loose teeth around, wondering where the lightning came from. This is my father, Zeke Daley. And the good-looking young cowboy who is watching Delight with such devoted eyes is Frank Farmer, who owns a ranch down the valley."

Zeke Daley was a gnarled, kindly faced, inoffensive-looking cowman. His faded brown eyes carried a bewildered hunted look.

Frank Farmer appeared to be about twenty-five. Well-built, slender, with the eyes of a dreamer, and thin, sensitive features, he was plainly upset by the attention the alluring young Delight Daley was giving Colton. It was easy to see that he was desperately in love with the vivacious, dark-eyed girl.

THERE was something pathetic in the way Zeke Daley gripped Colton's hand. "We can shore use a man like you in this country, Thorne," he said fervently.

"Carla told me about the warning you got from Larch Lash yesterday. You ain't the only one that Lash is crowding. We're all in the same boat. There's only eight or nine of us ranchers left in the valley, holdin' out ag'in him. We ain't whipped yet!"

Frank Farmer's handshake was less enthusiastic. "It isn't healthy to prod Larch Lash and Bat Buckmaster, Thorne," he warned. "You can't stop a bullet with your fists, you know."

"Spoken like a true Tamarack Valley rancher, Frank," Delight Daley snapped. "I hardly believe Lee Thorne will scare as easy as some."

Frank Farmer went white, stung by her scorn, and Colton felt a little sorry for the scholarly-looking rider. Farmer did not stack up as a fighting man; he didn't even look the part of a rancher. He seemed better fitted for the profession of a lawyer or a doctor. Though he packed a gun, it seemed out of place on his hip.

BORN TO THE GUNSMOKE CODE

The willful, luscious Delight Daley was smiling warmly up at Colton. "I've hoped and prayed for someone to muster nerve enough to stand up to Lash and his gunmen," she breathed. "Now that you've set the example, perhaps. . . ."

She did not finish. And Colton clearly saw that she was using him merely to goad Frank Farmer into a fighting mood. The burning desperation in Farmer's eyes told that she was succeeding.

"We're makin' war medicine at my ranch tonight," Zeke Daley told Colton. "I'm runnin' for sheriff, an' we're havin' a political pow-wow. There'll be plenty of folks present who are bein' hazed by Lash. He owns Nick Larkin body an' soul. Larkin, usin' his badge as an excuse, has helped chouse us around with a lot of petty arrests and tax liens. He's let Lash's killers run hog-wild. If we can get control of the sheriff's office we'll have the battle won. I'd be proud to have you make a talk at the meetin' tonight, an' the boys will be mighty glad to have you throw in with us. We'll all hang an' rattle in this last stand ag'in Larch Lash."

Colton wanted to refuse. He could see the drift of things. Zeke Daley, mild-mannered and lacking the qualifications for leadership, was already subtly pushing him into the foreground as the champion of the embattled ranchers. And the winsome, dark-eyed Delight was ably helping her father in that plan.

Colton felt a swift resentment. He had worn the law badge for two danger-fraught years in Dragoon, fighting the battles of weaker men, protecting them with his nerve and strength. And the men he had shielded there had been the first to condemn him as a coward when he refused to satisfy their blood-lust by matching his gun-speed against Bat Buckmaster. He had vowed that he would fight only his own battles hereafter. But he could not resist the appeal in Zeke Daley's eyes.

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"I'll listen to what's said," he agreed. "But only as a spectator."

Delight Daley was disappointed by the way he qualified his acceptance. And she promptly showed her disapproval by riding ahead with Frank Farmer.

Carla jogged along at Colton's side. She had a lithe grace in the saddle. Colton found himself suddenly revising his first belief that she was rather plain looking. She was trim and shapely, and had a beauty that seemed to come from within.

She carried a .30-.30 rifle slung in a scabbard on the saddle, and Colton saw the way she kept watching the timber and coulees along the way. Now and then a shadow crossed her face as she glanced at her father.

"Your dad mentioned that he expected to be elected sheriff," he remarked. "From the way the town was plastered with Nick Larkin's name, I figured nobody else had a chance."

"Lash has spent a lot of money on flashy display," she said. "But there are enough honest voters in this county to elect Dad. If he lives."

"If he lives?" Colton was startled.

Her lips were tight. "The independent ranchers put up one of their number as candidate for sheriff against Nick Larkin two years ago. He was murdered the night before the votes were cast. Larkin was duly elected without opposition. I don't want that to happen to Dad. He knew the chances he was taking when he consented to oppose Larkin for the office. Lash doesn't care for any opposition whatever."

Colton knew now why she was keeping a wary eye on the coulees. She feared a bushwhack. His nerves tightened.

She glanced at him strangely. "Even a man like Dad who shrinks from the thought of bloodshed, has his own type of courage, Thorne. Not all the brave men carry their bravery like a banner for all the world to admire."

BORN TO THE GUNSMOKE CODE

Colton puzzled over that cryptic statement as they rode on to Zeke Daley's modest Seven Cross ranch. Somehow he felt that her cool eyes hinted at secret knowledge that concerned him.

IT WAS not until Colton saw the pathetic attendance at the political rally that Zeke Daley called to order after dark in his Seven Cross ranch yard, that he realized how slender was the thread of hope these harried cowmen held.

Less than a dozen men showed up. And they shunned the glare of the lantern that Daley had hung from the bows of the chuckwagon which served as a rostrum.

"Larch Lash and his gunmen were riding last night," Carla told Colton. "In addition to shooting up your place, they raided three more ranches down the valley. Two more owners sold out to Lash today and quit the country. They practically gave their land and cattle to Lash, at the price he set. Lash has made it plain that it won't be healthy to vote for Dad for sheriff."

Zeke Daley was trying to arouse his dubious listeners. "Larch Lash has had his way because we've been a pack of spineless fools," he thundered. "But we've come at last to the turn in the trail. We'll win this election, an' drive Lash an' his rats out of the Tamarack. I met a man today who proved that he'd never knuckle down to Larch Lash or Bat Buckmaster. He's a newcomer to this range, an' I'm proud to say that he's throwin' in with us. When I'm elected sheriff I aim to name him as my deputy. Gents, take a look at a fightin' man from the chunk—Lee Thorne!"

There was a stir of interest. Colton's face was suddenly cold and scornful. He stepped forward. "You've got it all wrong, Daley," he countered harshly. "What you really mean is that I'm to take on the job of killing Larch Lash and Bat Buckmaster. That's the only way this fight can ever be won. In your hearts you know there'll be

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no peace in this range until these two men are dead, no matter who wears the sheriff's star. It's a chore you've all crawled away from for years. Now you try to shoulder it off onto me. I don't care to be your boss gunman, Daley. Nor do I aim to do the fighting for men who have been too yellow to stand up for their own rights in the past."

There was a shocked silence and an indignant gasp. Delight rushed into the glare of the torch, facing Colton with blazing eyes. "You—you coward!" she raged. "I thought at last we had found a man with some courage. But I was mistaken. You're no better than the rest. A coward, just like all men!"

Carla Daley, standing back in the shadows of the wagon, was staring without expression at Colton.

Zeke Daley looked like a man who had lost his last shred of hope. "Good God, Thorne!" he began hoarsely. "You can't stand aside in this fight. We need someone to lead us, an' you're—"

A rifle cracked from in the dark timber beyond the corral. Colton saw the spurt of dust that leaped from the front of Zeke Daley's vest.

Daley stood there, stricken an instant. Then he fell forward from the wagon into Colton's arms.

Colton placed him on the ground and bent close. After a moment he straightened, looking up at the two sisters.

"Your father's dead," he said reluctantly. "Shot through the heart!"

CHAPTER 4

Too Tough to Kill!

CARLA DALEY swayed an instant, then steadied. Her young sister uttered an agonized scream. She leveled a frenzied finger at Colton. "They murdered him!" she choked. "Murdered

BORN TO THE GUNSMOKE CODE

my father! Shot him down in cold blood. Now will you fight?"

Frank Farmer drew her against him, and led her away as she burst into hysterical, heart-broken sobbing.

The ranchers rushed into the timber in search of the killer. But the sounds that came back indicated that their pursuit was futile.

Colton carried Zeke Daley's body into the house and placed it on a bed. He stood for long seconds looking down at the lined, tired face of the colorless little rancher who had bucked a fighting game, the rules of which he did not savvy.

Zeke Daley looked at rest there, his eyes closed, a small faint smile on his lips as though he had realized in that last instant of life that he was going to eternal peace.

Colton pulled up the sheet and turned. Only Carla was in the room, watching him with her mysterious gray-green eyes. She was restraining the grief that tore at her heart.

She said slowly, "Frank Farmer is riding to Tamarack to shoot it out with Larch Lash and Bat Buckmaster."

Her sister came rushing into the room, sobbing bitterly. "They'll kill Frank," she choked, flying into Carla's arms. "I tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen. I don't want Frank to die. I love him so."

"You wanted him to fight," Colton reminded her harshly.

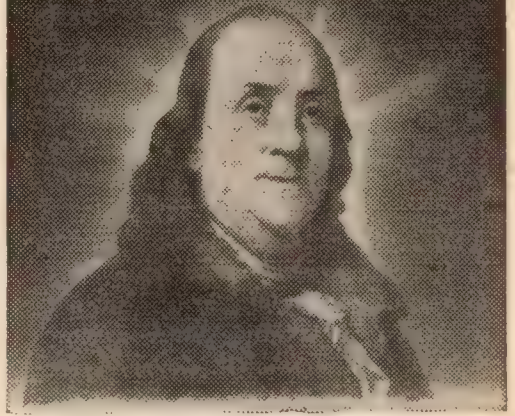
"I didn't mean it," Delight moaned. "I-I didn't understand. I've never seen a man die—like Dad went. I don't want Frank to—to. . . oh, dear God! Can't we do anything to stop him?"

She was half-fainting in her sister's arms. But Carla stood there strong and calm, holding her and looking squarely at Colton.

"Frank Farmer is no fightin' man, Thorne," she said slowly. "He's never drawn a gun in anger in his life."

"You think I ought to save him?" Colton burst out.

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She shook her head. "What I think doesn't count now. All that matters is the way you look at it."

Colton was white, shaken by conflicting demands on his conscience. He wanted above all to escape from Carla Daley's insistent eyes, and to keep his promise to himself that he would never fight another man's battles. . . . He turned and walked out of the bedroom.

Heading blindly across the little living room toward the outer door, he stopped suddenly, staring at the center table.

On the table, in the glow of a shaded lamp, lay a matched brace of cedar-handled six-shooters.

Colton stood motionless, looking at the initials lettered in gold on the grips of these guns. *K.C.*—for King Colton, who had ruled the gun-empire of the Platte!

THESE were his guns—the ones he had abandoned that night in Dragoon. With magnetic power they drew him to the table.

He uttered a dry, hollow laugh of defeat then. He did not know why his guns were here at a time like this. He buckled on the holsters and slid the .44's into place. Then he walked out of the house.

Carla Daley came to the front door and stood framed there in the lamplight as he rode away. The memory of that stayed with him. She was a strong woman—a real woman.

He crowded his horse and covered the ten miles to Tamarack in an hour's time. As the twinkling saloon lights of the town hove into close view, he sighted Farmer ahead. He caught up with him as the tall young rancher was dismounting in darkness off the main street.

"Go back to your girl, Farmer," Colton said roughly as he stepped down from his horse. "She loves you."

Farmer's mouth twisted in a snarl of derision. "I'm no coward, even if Delight thinks so," he panted. "I'll—"

BORN TO THE GUNSMOKE CODE

"This is no job for you," Colton broke in. And he drew his right gun and buf-faloed Frank Farmer back of the ear, dropping him to the ground.

He moved the stunned man against the wall of a warehouse. Then he stalked out into the street toward the Crystal Palace.

A few men were drinking at the bar, their high heels hooked over the footrail. More patrons were at card tables, or bucking the gambling layouts down the room.

At a table beyond the last gambling layout sat Larch Lash and Bat Buckmaster. They were placed so that they faced the entire room, with a blank wall at their backs.

Larch Lash and Buckmaster had more than half expected some wild-eyed rancher to attempt vengeance upon them for Zeke Daley's murder, and had chosen their position accordingly. The trap was set, and they were ready for all comers. But they had not anticipated the lithe, stony-eyed man who stepped into the room.

An ugly tension edged over the honkatonk. Spectators, ignorant of the cause, but aware of the sudden, deadly hush that moved down the room, began edging back suddenly.

COLTON did not advance from his place inside the door. There he had his back to a solid wall also.

He was looking at Bat Buckmaster. "Time an' destiny have a way of bending men to their purposes, Buckmaster," he said. "I've come to keep that appointment I had with you more than a year ago."

Bat Buckmaster's hard-muscled body inclined forward a trifle as he studied Colton. "What appointment?"

"The one I missed in Dragoon."

Buckmaster's body tightened, and recognition was already flashing into his face.

"Yeah," Colton said. "I'm King Colton."

Buckmaster and Lash came suddenly to

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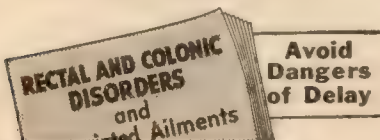
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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

their feet, and the scrape of their chairs was the only sound.

"You know why I'm here," Colton went on, spacing his words. "You're in on this too, Lash. I'm takin' on both of you. Not to prove that I'm a better man; not to demonstrate that I'm faster on the draw; but to square up for the murder of Zeke Daley, and all those other men you've gunned or driven out of this range. You two—or me—have reached the end of the trail."

Larch Lash leaped aside, filling his hands. He was fast—faster than Bat Buckmaster. But he was moving as he drew, and his first slugs slapped into the wall on either side of Colton.

Colton fired with both guns, holding his bead belt-high. His two slugs broke Larch Lash at the waist and hurled him aside, bullet-shattered and dead on his feet.

Buckmaster's guns came into the play amid the reverberations of those opening shots. Colton felt the hard, sledgehammer blow of a bullet in his side. He fell against the wall, and a second slug tore the gun from his right hand.

He sagged to one knee, firing with his remaining gun. The oil lamps were flickering in the ceiling brackets as the gun explosions tore through the honkatonk, and Bat Buckmaster's figure was a dim shape through the powder haze.

Colton steadied himself and centered Buckmaster with his last two bullets. Then he held his fire. Buckmaster was down, his eyes glassy with death.

The bartenders shot out the last of the lamps then.

The rumble of frenzied men stampeding through doors and windows arose. The half dozen Forty Bar gunmen who were in the room had tried to get into the fight, but now the darkness and the smell of gunpowder and blood drove panic through them, and they fought their way to open air along with the crowd.

BORN TO THE GUNSMOKE CODE

COLTON was still there, sinking slowly down against the wall. The saloon was deserted now. Only Lash and Buckmaster were his companions in this place now, and they were dead.

Outside a frenzied man was shouting: "Buckmaster's dead. Lash is dead! It was King Colton—Colton of Dragoon!"

Scattered gunfire arose, and he heard galloping hooves, cursing and wild yelling. He vaguely comprehended that at last the men of Tamarack town were aroused, and driving out Lash's gunmen.

And then he heard a woman wildly calling his name. She seemed to be in the dark, deserted honkatonk.

"Carla!" he managed to say.

He felt her lift his head, and knew the soothing comfort of rest in her arms.

"Colton!" she was sobbing. "Oh, Colton! I sent you into this. Once I tried to hire you as a killer—I was the veiled woman who came to you that night in Dragoon to buy your guns. But they weren't for sale for money, were they? Only in defense of weaker men. I realized that too late. I came back to that hotel room later that night, but only your guns were there. I understood why you had abandoned them. So I kept them myself—and gave them back to you."

She held him closer, pillowing his head against her bosom.

Carla Daley had known from the first that he was King Colton of Dragoon. That realization seemed to drive the numbing weakness from Colton's mind. He drew her face down and kissed her.

A lamp had been lighted, and a doctor was working on him. But all that he saw was her fine eyes close to his, glowing with an exalted tenderness. "You won't die now, will you, dear?" she begged. "I-I've always been waiting for you—all my life!"

Colton was smiling a little. "I won't die, Carla," he promised.

THE END

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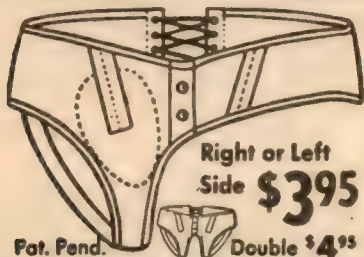
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BRIMMS PLASTI-LINER
THE PERMANENT DENTURE RELINER

BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 75)

"What the hell's all this?" he boomed. "You, Deacon? By, hell, I told Starling—"

No one bothered about the kid, who had collapsed so close to the body of Harbin that he might have touched him.

But Irv Brinker's scornful voice knifed at Jukes now. "I reckon you told Starling you was goin' to pry the lid off up in these hills, didn't you? Well, why haven't you? Where in the hell you been? You come bustin' up here like a damned thick-headed goat, with your pants just blazin', when it's all over. G'wan out an' string up a coyote, Jukes. Any of you guys got a can-teen?"

The tension broke. Someone guffawed, and Addison Jukes began to mutter about a blamed kid who needed his ears pinned back. A fire was started, and by the light of it Deacon Bottle dressed the wound in Irv Brinker's leg, explaining to Jukes as he did so. His reason for being in the hills was hazy, but his story was told with sufficient impressiveness to pass muster for the moment. Logical details could be summoned from the Deacon's fertile mind at a later date.

The dead men were lashed to their horses, Harbin with particular care, and the party proceeded down to Latigo. On the way Irv Brinker drew his mount carefully alongside the Deacon.

"When you was fixin' my leg by the fire, Deacon, I—uh—I'd swear that gun you got in your waistband—"

"Like it, do you, my boy? said Deacon Bottle blandly. "Then you can have it. Two is about all a man can pack anyhow without foundering his pony." He passed the weapon over solemnly. "Now you get on along. Your dad's waitin' for you in the Desert Eagle. Tell him that you got Harbin, which means you got two thousand bucks coming. That ought to help to put the Brinker outfit on its feet. . . ."

QUITTER TRAIL

(Continued from page 89)

puzzled, and then his face reddened and the cords of his neck stood out.

We don't want Jimmy. We're going to Californy. Give him to your wife who likes him.

Their own flesh and blood! How could they have done a thing like that?

The baby whimpered, its tiny face puckered against the strong sunlight. Then it began to wail, and Anson jumped.

He hurried to saddle the mare, then put the cradle on the pommel, mounted and rode down to the wagons. They were about ready to pull out, he saw.

"When did that bunch pull out for California?" he asked a woman.

"Why, last night. Didn't you know?"

Anson groaned. He could run them down and that would be another two days wasted. And suppose they wouldn't take back their baby? He wet his lips. And suppose they did? Wouldn't it be just like them to leave it again? Maybe along the trail for the wolves to get at. It'd happened before and would likely happen again. He let that horror run through him, while the woman looked curiously at the cradle.

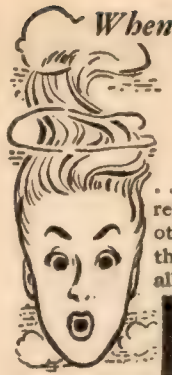
"They left their baby," Anson said.

"No!" The woman gasped. She turned and shouted, "Emily!" and when Emily came running she said, "Them folks last night, the woman that's been sick, they left their baby."

Others came from the wagons, gathered around. Anson felt mighty foolish sitting on his horse with the cradle balanced atop the pommel. And when the blacksmith heard the news and started to howl, slapping his knee, it was just too much.

He lowered the cradle to eager hands and said, "Here, feed him something," and then he slid down and held the blacksmith with his eyes. "You and me," he said, and spat on his hard, calloused hands.

The blacksmith was eager enough, but



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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

he didn't stay eager very long. Anson let him get in the first lick, though, and he relished the solid impact as it shook him. Then he came in with both fists flying, and a wild roaring in his chest. Two meaty blows drove the blacksmith back. One deep in the belly snapped him double. The last one Anson let fly from the ground up, and the blacksmith spread-eagled ten feet away.

"I reckon I got that took care of," Anson breathed.

AN HOUR later he was riding at a steady lope along the trail. The mare was fresh and strong. Anson figured he could make three, four times the crawl of the wagons, so with luck he'd catch up to them at evening camp.

It was coming on dark when he spotted the cooking fires inside the circled wagons.

He rode straight for his wagon, and Susan ran to meet him, her skirts flying. Her mother shouted after her, but she kept coming.

"Anson!" Susan panted when she reached the mare. "What have you got—oh, Anson!"

"They didn't want him," Anson said. He handed the baby down to her, then slid down and tied the mare.

"Anson," his wife said softly, rocking the baby. She couldn't keep her eyes from her husband's face. "You've come back."

"Saddled with a baby!" her mother snorted.

Anson looked at his mother-in-law. "You want to go back to Ohio," he said to her.

She drew herself up. "Of course we're going back."

"Good," Anson said, nodding. "Because I aim to take Susan on to Oregon." He smiled at his wife. "How does that set?"

She straightened to answer his smile, her eyes moving across his face. "It's your right to say," she said softly.

"What about us?" Mrs. Jameson demanded anxiously.

QUITTER TRAIL

"It's about time that lazy, good-for-nothing husband of yours earned his keep—and yours."

"But all alone—no, we couldn't—"

Her eyes were frightened, Anson saw, and it shocked him. It was like Ben's eyes when Burton had told him they were leaving him behind.

"Jed!" he called. "Come on out of the shadows." When the man came forward, he said, "From now on you tend to your own chores, understand? And when we get to Oregon you'll build your own house and till your own land."

"I'll do my best, Anson."

"Good." He looked at them, and finally he smiled. "It's all right now, and I'm mighty hungry."

"I was just starting supper," his mother-in-law said, and bustled around the fire.

Jed coughed. "I'd better look after the mare," he said.

Anson put his arms around his wife, the baby between them, and there was a far-away look in his eyes. Susan sighed and her head dropped against his chest. Her voice was muffled when she told him she'd felt all lost inside when he rode away. They were three now, she said, snuggling the baby against her bosom, so would he please not ride away like that again? They needed him, and they'd need him more, because by the time they reached Oregon, or maybe a little later, they'd be four.

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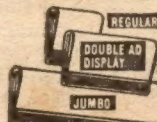
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3c A DAY IS ALL YOU PAY for this outstanding new Family Protection

Wonderful news! This new policy covers everyone from infancy to age 70! When sickness or accident sends you or a member of your family to the hospital—this policy **PAYS \$100.00 PER WEEK** for a day, a month, even a year . . . or just as long as you stay in the hospital. What a wonderful feeling to know your savings are protected and you won't have to go into debt. The money is paid **DIRECT TO YOU** to spend as you wish. This remarkable new Family Hospital Protection costs only 3c a day for each adult 18 to 59 years of age, and for age 60 to 70 only 4½c a day. This policy even covers children up to 18 years of age with cash benefits of \$50.00 a week while in the hospital—yet the cost is only 1½c a day for each child! Benefits paid while confined to any recognized hospital, except government hospitals, rest homes and clinics, spas or sanitariums. Pick your own doctor. Naturally this wonderful policy is issued only to individuals and families now in good health; otherwise the cost would be sky high. But once protected, you are covered for about every sickness or accident. Persons covered may return as often as necessary to the hospital within the year.

This is What \$100.00 a Week Can Mean to You When in the Hospital for Sickness or Accident

Money melts away fast when you or a member of your family has to go to the hospital. You have to pay costly hospital board and room . . . doctor's bills and maybe the surgeon's bill too . . . necessary medicines, operating room fees—a thousand and one things you don't count on. What a Godsend this **READY CASH BENEFIT WILL BE TO YOU**. Here's cash to go a long way toward paying heavy hospital expenses—and the money left over can help pay you for time lost from your job or business. Remember—all cash benefits are paid directly to you.

REMEMBER—\$100.00 A WEEK CASH BENEFIT IS ACTUALLY \$14.25 PER DAY!

Examine This Policy Without Cost or Obligation—Read It—Talk It Over—Then Decide

10 DAYS FREE EXAMINATION

You are invited to inspect this new kind of Family Hospital Plan. We will send the actual policy to you for ten days at no cost or obligation. Talk it over with your banker, doctor, lawyer or spiritual adviser. Then make up your mind. This policy backed by the full resources of the nationally known Service Life Insurance Company of Omaha, Nebraska—organized under the laws of Nebraska and with policyholders in every state. **SEND NO MONEY**—just your name and address! No obligation, of course!

FREE INSPECTION . . . MAIL COUPON

The Actual Policy Will Come to You at Once Without Cost or Obligation

The Service Life Insurance Company

Hospital Department P-65, Omaha 2, Nebraska
 Please rush the new Family Hospital Protection Plan Policy to me on 10 days Free Inspection. I understand that I am under no obligation.

Name.....

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